

NEW

THE END OF NAZI GERMANY: HITLER REFUSED TO FACE DEFEAT

Bringing History to Life

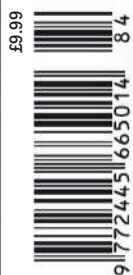
**"We were
tasked with
halting the
Red Army's
advance"**

Hans Müncheberg
was assigned to the
SS aged 15

**Hitler's
final plan**

General defied the
Führer's orders

THE FALL OF BERLIN



STRUGGLE IN POTSDAM

How the
Allies carved
up Germany



CIVILIANS ON THE RUN

Red Army's
vengeance
was brutal

STALIN'S SLEDGEHAMMER

Soviet shells
rained down
on Berlin



ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS ★ AUTHENTIC LETTERS

EUROPE – December 1944



- Germany and occupied countries
- Neutral countries
- Soviet territory
- Allied territory

0 200 400 km

WELCOME

For 12 years, Adolf Hitler had been the infallible leader of the Third Reich. By 1945, every German should have realised that they had voted a madman into power. Germany's cities lay in ruins, its people were starving and its once mighty armies were on the run. The war was lost and there was no way to turn the tide.

Much to the chagrin of German civilians, Hitler refused to admit defeat. In the Führerbunker, the disillusioned leader sat shuffling armies that existed only on paper. Like a man who had lost all sense of reality, he alternated between choleric outbursts of rage and childish fantasies that the Third Reich could be saved if only all Germans fought with his conviction. He sent children, young and old to their deaths without a second thought, for if Nazi Germany could not win, its people must perish, so he believed.

The price of Hitler's madness was high. Just as the Germans had slaughtered their way through the Soviet Union, the Red Army was now paying back with interest. The hour of revenge had come.

This is the story of the fall of Nazi Germany.

Enjoy the issue.



In 1945, millions of Germans packed up their personal belongings and fled from the Red Army, which was slaughtering its way through former German possessions.

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Flight and panic in the East

As 1945 began, an ominous report landed on Hitler's desk: a major Soviet offensive was expected within weeks. The Führer dismissed the report as nonsense, but quickly learned the truth when the Red Army attacked. **Page 6**

The hour of revenge

As the Red Army surged into Germany, German civilians suffered cruel reprisals. Reports of mass rapes, crucifixions and the murder of babies soon spread like wildfire through Germany. **Page 22**

German generals feared Hitler

Even when defeat was inevitable, Wehrmacht generals fought on. According to renowned historian Sir Ian Kershaw, this persistence wasn't just down to a sense of duty, but also fear of the Führer's reprisals. **Page 40**

Battle of Berlin

Sacrificed for Hitler

Senior Nazis became so desperate that they deployed child soldiers and old men to defend Berlin. With his usual flair, Hitler dubbed the units *Volkssturm* (People's Storm), but in reality the new unit was merely the reserves' reserves. **Page 42**

"We couldn't leave ... Deserters were shot"

Hans Müncheberg was 15 years old when his headmaster sent him to the SS. Together with his classmates, he was tasked with stopping the Soviet encirclement of Berlin in April 1945. His fight lasted until 9th May. **Page 58**

Berlin's final days

Around 1.5 million Soviets stood ready to encircle Berlin and take the city, street by street. Meanwhile, Berliners huddled in the ruins, praying for mercy from the enemy. But in Berlin there would be no mercy. **Page 62**


Hitler's downfall

The Führer had entrenched himself in the Führerbunker beneath Berlin. With him was a group of devoted aides, and they would not fail their leader even in the hour of disaster. Down in the bunker they awaited the inevitable defeat. **Page 82**

Battle for control in the ruins

In the weeks leading up to Hitler's death, a power struggle began between the Führer's heirs, who wanted to play a leading role in the new Germany. But the Allies had other plans for Germany's future. **Page 104**



A color photograph of a Soviet soldier in a brown uniform and cap, standing in a room with rubble. He is looking down at a large, broken wooden eagle emblem that once bore the Nazi swastika. The eagle's wings are spread, and the swastika is visible on its chest. The soldier's hands are on his hips. The background shows a destroyed interior with a broken chair and debris.

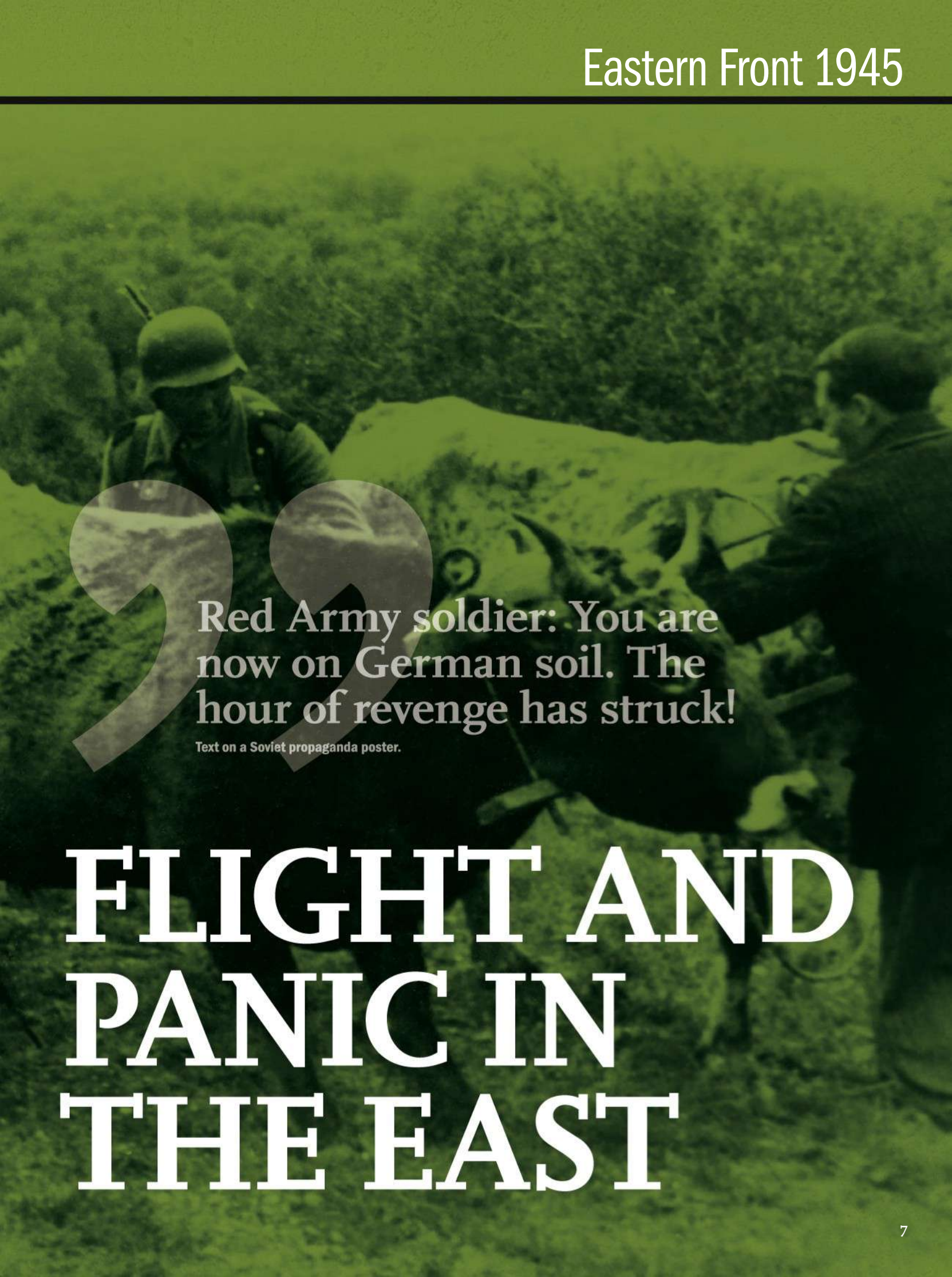
Our troops were in a
state of frenzy ... We
just wanted to finish
them off.

Mikhail Borisov, Soviet lieutenant.

*In 1945, the Nazi eagle
finally lay at the feet of
those Allied troops
taking Berlin.*



A desperate retreat took place in 1945 on the Eastern Front, where the Germans had used up almost all their fuel and often had to push their guns forward.



Red Army soldier: You are
now on German soil. The
hour of revenge has struck!

Text on a Soviet propaganda poster.

FLIGHT AND PANIC IN THE EAST

Flight and panic in the East

As 1945 began, an ominous report landed on Hitler's desk: a major Soviet offensive was expected within weeks. The Führer, however, dismissed the news as nonsense and demanded the author be fired. But he was soon to regret his decision as four million Soviet soldiers launched an onslaught on Berlin.

By Troels Ussing

Winter was hanging over Berlin. December's darkness enveloped the capital, and Berliners struggled to feel festive even though Christmas was just around the corner. The seasonal scent of pretzels and mulled wine in the streets had been replaced by a pervasive odour of burning rising from the rubble of the bombed city. A smell that reminded the citizens that the end was near.

"Be practical: give a coffin," was the tragicomic cry of Berliners in the days leading up to Christmas 1944.

Not that many years before, Germans had gorged themselves on goose and pork at Christmas, but now Berlin housewives had to wait in long lines, ration stamps in hand, just to get hold of basic foodstuffs. For the past six months, Hitler's empire had been squeezed by the Soviet Union in the east and the Allies in the west, and day by day the borders

were moving closer to Berlin. The Third Reich was about to fall. The vast majority of the capital's three million inhabitants were facing facts. Some tried to live life to the full and make the most of their borrowed time. They spent their money with abandon and threw themselves into sexual encounters with anyone and everyone to get their last moments of pleasure while they could. For others, the despair was so crushing and the future so bleak that they took their own lives behind locked doors in the city's public toilets.

One man in Germany, however, had not given up hope. In December 1944, the Reich's leader of nearly 12 years was at the Führer Headquarters at *Adlerhorst* (Eagle's Nest) in the Hesse mountains, 500 kilometres south-west of Berlin, and from his heavily guarded hideout, Hitler was still utterly convinced that his troops would turn adversity into victory.

Less optimistic was Chief of the General Staff of German Army High Command Heinz Guderian, who visited the Führer on Christmas Eve. Colonel-General Guderian's intelligence indicated that the Red Army was preparing a major offensive on the Eastern Front, with the ultimate aim of reaching Berlin. The attack was likely to take place within three weeks, and the

Soviets' superiority was worrying. Guderian's sources estimated that the enemy front from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Adriatic in the south had ten times as many infantrymen, 20 times as many artillery and air forces, and seven times as many tanks as the Germans.

"It's the greatest imposture since Genghis Khan. Who is responsible for producing all this rubbish?" Hitler shouted, referring to the Mongol ruler's ability to fool the enemy using illusion. Hitler's Reichsführer,

The strategic mastermind of the Red Army was Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who in January 1945 prepared for the final push into Germany.

Georgy Zhukov



Heinrich Himmler, sided with his leader. *"You know, my dear Colonel-General, I don't really believe the Russians will attack at all. It's all an enormous bluff. The figures given by your department are grossly exaggerated. They're far too worried. I'm convinced there's nothing going on in the East,"* he explained to Guderian, to whom it was clear that the Nazi leadership were refusing to face reality – they were certain that the enemy could still be defeated, while in reality the countdown to doomsday had just begun.

Soviet threat was real

Guderian's intelligence was anything but exaggerated rubbish. All along the Soviet front, from East Prussia to southern Poland, tanks and trucks carrying troops and equipment rumbled towards the front lines. Some four million soldiers stood ready for battle at the start of the operation in January 1945; 2.2 million of them were under the command of Stalin's top marshals Georgy Zhukov and Ivan Konev, who were to attack western Poland and Silesia from their bridgeheads on the Vistula River. From there, the marshals' goal was to barrel into the lion's den across Germany's original 1939 border and on towards the greatest trophy of all: Berlin. For the task, Zhukov and Konev had an impressive arsenal at their disposal, including 4,529 tanks, 2,513 self-propelled guns, 2,198 Katyusha – also known as Stalin's organs – and nearly 30,000 artillery projectiles and mortars.

After his failed attempt on Christmas Eve, Guderian went to Adlerhorst again on 9th January to outline the gravity of the situation to Hitler and his loyal supporters. The latest air reconnaissance indicated that the Soviets had 8,000 aircraft concentrated along the fronts of East Prussia and the Vistula. With the Luftwaffe virtually out of fuel and unable to send remaining aircraft into the air, the Soviet planes posed another massive threat, but Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring did not believe Guderian's report either.

"Mein Führer, don't believe that. Those are not real planes. Those are just decoys," raged Göring.

"The Reichsmarschall is right!" agreed Hitler's faithful supporter, military adviser Wilhelm Keitel.

Frustrated, Guderian presented his superiors with maps that his skilled intelligence officers had prepared, meticulously recording all the heavily reinforced Soviet positions in East Prussia and at the Vistula, so the leaders could at least visualise the dangerous situation on the front. According to Guderian, the maps were no help.

"Hitler completely lost his temper when these were shown to him, declaring them to be 'completely idiotic' and ordering that I have the man who had made them shut up in a lunatic asylum. I then lost my temper and said to Hitler: 'The man who made these is General Gehlen, one of my very best general staff officers. I should not have shown them to you were I

in disagreement with them. If you want General Gehlen sent to a lunatic asylum, then you had better have me certified as well.' Hitler's demand that I relieve General Gehlen of his post I brusquely refused," Heinz Guderian wrote in his memoirs. The mood was not helped by the hard-pressed Guderian explaining that the German generals on the Eastern Front wanted to withdraw their main line of defence some 19 kilometres behind the front so that as few soldiers as possible would lose their lives during the initial Soviet bombardment.

"[I] submitted it to Hitler. He lost his temper, saying that he refused to accept the sacrifice of 12 miles without a fight and ordered that the major defensive line be built from one to two miles behind the main line of defence. He was basing his ideas on the conditions prevailing in World War I ... This mistake of his was to cost us dear," recounted Guderian, who once again left Adlerhorst with unfinished business.

Just three days later, the Soviet offensive began.

Top marshals launched attack

It was 04.35 on the morning of 12th January 1945, when the silence of the winter night west of the southern Polish town of Baranów Sandomierski was broken by the roar of Soviet gunfire. Marshal Konev had nearly 300 guns per kilometre, and their shots whizzed through the thick snow, ripping up the forward German positions west of the Vistula. Battalion commander Reinhardt Müller despaired at the effect the firestorm had on the Germans. His battalion was already outnumbered, but by the time the smoke of the Soviet bombardment drifted away, he had only one platoon of combat-ready troops left.

The surviving Germans in the front line were greeted by the next act of Konev's performance. Partially camouflaged by layers of ice from the Polish winter frost, Russian T-34 tanks roared across the landscape, firing at the German defence positions. Beneath the tanks' covering of ice were written battle cries such as *"Forward into the fascist lair!"* and *"Revenge and death to the German occupiers!"* – slogans that were imprinted on the minds of the ►

STRENGTH RATIO

The odds were clearly in the Soviets' favour in 1945. Before the Vistula-Oder offensive, the Soviets had

4 million

soldiers, while the Germans had only about

450,000

combat-ready troops to resist them.

HEINZ GUDERIAN (1888-1954)

At the start of the war, Guderian led a panzer army and his breakthrough to the English Channel in May 1940 was instrumental in the French collapse. The following year, Guderian was dismissed by Hitler for insubordination. However, he proved indispensable and was recalled in 1943, and in July 1944 was appointed chief of the General Staff.



Facing no resistance, Red Army tanks blasted into Germany, causing panic among enemy troops.



advancing Soviet troops who followed the tanks, slaughtering their opponents.

Two days later, Zhukov launched his attack further north, using the same tactics as Konev: heavy artillery fire followed by tanks and infantry. Zhukov's tanks roared up to the Pilica River, a tributary of the Vistula, where, according to Colonel Iosif Gusev, the Soviets used a clever trick to quickly cross the water:

"We blew up the ice and crossed over on the riverbed, thus saving two to three hours. All that ice rose in a gigantic mountain in front of the tanks and crashed down making a terrible noise ... We were moving extremely fast; there were days when we advanced 115-120 kilometres in 24 hours," the colonel told Soviet war correspondent Vasily Grossman, who was following the Red Army.

Hitler's personal armoured train was heading for Berlin. The Führer had agreed to establish a new headquarters in the bunker at the Reich Chancellery in the heart of the capital *"because of the big advance in the east"*, as Hitler's personal secretary, Martin Bormann, wrote in his diary.

On 16th January – as Zhukov's forces approached Warsaw – Guderian again visited Hitler, and once more the meeting turned farcical. The Führer now demanded of Guderian that heads should roll because the troops had failed to stop the Soviets.

"Hitler's rage was turned against the men who had built the defences and – since I stood up to him – against me. He [maintained] that he had always wanted a 12-mile gap [between the front and the main defence line]. 'Who was the half-wit who gave such idiotic orders?'"

"I pointed out to him that it was he himself who had done so. The minutes were brought and read aloud. After a few sentences, Hitler broke off the reading. He was convinced at last. Unfortunately, it was by then too late, for the Russian break-through was an accomplished fact," Guderian later wrote.

To the frustration of the chief of staff, Hitler's next decisions were no wiser. The Führer's response to the enemy advance was to appoint Himmler to command the newly created Army Group Vistula. Himmler, who was completely inexperienced and inept as a commander-in-chief, was thus given the responsibility of stopping the veteran Soviet marshals between the Vistula and Oder rivers.

Colonel Hans-Georg Eismann of the General Staff was assigned to be Army Group Vistula's chief operations officer and, like Guderian, he was not impressed with his new boss. When Eismann shook hands with the bespectacled Himmler during their first meeting, the colonel remarked that the Reichsführer's hand was *"soft like a woman's"*. Eismann quickly realised during their first conversations that Himmler knew almost nothing about military matters and warfare. *"[A]▶*



Germany would perish under Hitler

Hitler's Nero Decree ordered the destruction of German industry and infrastructure. But Albert Speer prevented the order to lay waste to Germany from being carried out.

On 19th March 1945, Hitler issued the command that later became known as the Nero Decree – named after the Roman Emperor Nero, who set fire to Rome to force the Romans to support him. With the order, Hitler demanded that all German industry and infrastructure be destroyed so that

nothing of value fell into enemy hands – the ultimate scorched-earth tactic.

Minister of Armaments Albert Speer was supposed to ensure the order was carried out, but he was strongly opposed to it, because the destruction would be at the expense of the German people. So, Speer

ensured that the directive remained largely unimplemented by preventing the Gauleiters and Reichskommissars from learning of it. Speer's deed was an act of treason, but when Hitler learned of the failure to carry out the order, he was so broken that he did not act with his usual cynicism towards Speer.

SPEER'S NOTES: Minister of Armaments Albert Speer was charged with implementing the Nero Decree, and his own copy with notes has been preserved. Speer in no way approved of the content of the order and tried to persuade Hitler to shelve the idea before issuing it.

SECRET: The document was classified as secret material concerning the Reich until the command reached the troops.

DESTROY EVERYTHING: The message from Hitler was clear – nothing useful was to be left on German soil: "All military transport and communication facilities, industrial establishments and supply depots, as well as anything else of value within Reich territory, which could in any way be used by the enemy immediately or within the foreseeable future for the prosecution of the war, will be destroyed."

Der Vernichtungsbefehl. (Adolf Hitler)
 Fernschreiben.
 M 1518 / 45
 Geheime Reichssache.
 Herrn Reichsminister Speer
 (gleichzeitend an)
 20.3. 1945
 Der Führer hat am 19.3.45 nachstehenden Befehl erlassen:
 Betr.: Zerstörungsmassnahmen im Reichsgebiet.
 Der Kampf um die Existenz unseres Volkes zwingt auch innerhalb des Reichsgebietes zur Ausnutzung aller Mittel, die die Kampfkraft unseres Feindes schwächen, und sein weiteres Vordringen behindern. Alle Möglichkeiten, der Schlagkraft des Feindes unmittelbar oder mittelbar den nachhaltigsten Schaden zuzufügen, müssen ausgenutzt werden. Es ist ein Irrtum zu glauben, nicht zerstörte oder nur kurzfristig gelähmte Verkehrs-, Nachrichten-, Industrie- und Versorgungsanlagen bei der Rückgewinnung verlorener Gebiete für eigene Zwecke wieder in Betrieb nehmen zu können. Der Feind wird bei seinem Rückzug uns nur eine verbrannte Erde zurücklassen und jede Rücksichtnahme auf die Bevölkerung fallen lassen.
 Ich befehle daher:
 1) alle militärischen, Verkehrs-, Nachrichten-, Industrie- und Versorgungsanlagen sowie Sachwerte innerhalb des Reichsgebietes, die sich der Feind für die Fortsetzung seines Kampfes irgendwo sofort oder in absehbarer Zeit nutzbar machen kann, sind zu zerstören.
 2) Verantwortlich für die Durchführung dieser Zerstörungen sind die militärischen Kommandobehörden für alle militärischen Objekte einschliesslich der Verkehrs- und Nachrichtenanlagen; die Gauleiter und Reichsverteidigungskommissare für alle Industrie-, und Versorgungsanlagen sowie sonstigen Sachwerte. Den Gauleitern und Reichsverteidigungskommissaren ist bei der Durchführung ihrer Aufgaben durch die Truppe die notwendige Hilfe zu leisten.
 3) Dieser Befehl ist schnellstens allen Truppenführern bekanntzugeben, – entgegenstehende Weisungen sind ungültig.

(gez.): Adolf Hitler

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URGENT: For the Führer, there was no time to waste: "This order will be made known to all officers commanding troops as quickly as possible. Directives to the contrary are invalid."

blind man was speaking about colour,” Eismann later recounted.

Another German officer at the front was also unimpressed with Himmler – the Reichsführer was never ready for work until 10.30 because he had to have a massage in his quarters first.

“The bedroom was very elegant in reddish wood, with a suite of furniture and carpet in pale green. It was more the boudoir of a great lady than of a man commanding troops in war,” the officer wrote.

Soviets entered fascists' lair

Himmler – as predicted by the officers on the Eastern Front – worked no miracles. The Red Army rumbled steadily westward.

“Soldiers ... are dying to finish the war. They limbered up for two or three days, and then began to advance 30 to 50 kilometres every day,” said General Vasily Chuikov, the heroic defender of Stalingrad, who now commanded the 8th Guards Army, part of Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front.

“Now it's death to the Germans. They won't escape,” proclaimed Chuikov as his troops approached Germany.

Crossing the old 1939 border was a great moment for the Soviet soldiers – known to the Germans as Ivans. The propaganda machine in Moscow had done everything possible to provoke hatred of the enemy, and as the soldiers crossed the border, political officers had already put up posters saying: *“Red Army soldier: You are now on German soil. The hour of revenge has struck!”* The war correspondent Vasily Grossman also noted the special occasion when he reached

the border at the end of January and crossed into Germany:

“Twilight. It is foggy and rainy. A smell of forest mould. Puddles on the road. Dark pine woods, fields, farmsteads, barns, houses with pointed roofs. A huge poster: ‘Soldier, here it is! The Lair of the Fascist Beast.’ There is great charm in this landscape. Its small but very thick woods are beautiful, as well as the bluish-grey asphalt and clinker roads leading into them. And our artillery, self-propelled guns and shabby staff trucks full of looted things are moving on.”

The war correspondent's pen was not as hateful as that of the Ivans. The Soviet soldiers wondered why prosperous Germany, with its apparently rich agriculture, had been interested in invading the Soviet Union, but the Germans had done so, and therefore they had to suffer:

“Each step forward now has an historic significance ... Germany is burning and for some reason it is gratifying to watch this terrible sight. A death for a death; their blood for our blood – I do not feel sorry for these haters of mankind ... They started this war,” wrote Lieutenant Vladimir Gelfand in his diary as he crossed the border into Germany on 28th January 1945.

Another Soviet soldier wrote home in the same hateful tones in early February. He described how wonderful it was that the battles were no longer taking place in his homeland, but on enemy territory. Germany was in flames, and the Soviet soldiers were taking their revenge. Many Germans tried to escape but didn't get far. The Red Army soldiers found them and exacted retribution on them. The Soviet soldier

A Stalin's organ plays its deadly tune and fires a series of missiles at the German troops.



The Soviets are now on the Oder River. Stalin orders the offensive to halt so as not to weaken the supply lines.

With soldiers deserting in large numbers, Hitler orders all 'cowards' shot. The sentence can be passed and carried out at the front.

The Seelow Heights are captured by the Red Army. The road to the German capital is open to the Soviets.

recounted how he killed his enemies mercilessly and had not the slightest compassion for the wretched so-called Fritzes.

In some places, the Red Army's thirst for revenge was so great that captured German officers and soldiers were simply executed instead of being taken to the assembly areas from where they were to be sent to prison camps. Rumours of the executions naturally horrified the German defenders, who often fled while they could. It was a development that the Ivans watched with delight:

"We are beating and destroying the enemy, who is running back to his lair like a wounded beast," wrote artilleryman Yakov Aronov, whose description was not far off the mark. The Wehrmacht was indeed an injured animal – and the blood loss increased day by day.

German army was in decline

The rapid Soviet advance was mainly due to the fact that in many places the Red Army faced an opponent

who was running on its last reserves. In late January, Zhukov confidently informed the Stavka – the Soviet General Staff – that the Germans no longer had a coherent defence. The Wehrmacht was bleeding all along the front.

The German defenders were exhausted and nowhere near as strong as they'd been at the start of the war. Most of the experienced soldiers were either dead, wounded or captured. What remained were mostly units of questionable strength, often with very young, untrained soldiers defending the Reich.

Twenty-year-old Wolfgang Reinhardt had only just started his officer training in Poznan when he was suddenly needed urgently after the Soviet ►



Soviets crossed the Vistula and Oder rivers



From northern East Prussia to southern Poland, the Red Army rolled across the Vistula and Oder rivers, the last major obstacles before the German capital, Berlin, in early 1945. By August 1944, the Red Army had already reached deep into Poland to the Vistula River, but the soldiers now needed rest and the decimated troops required new men and equipment. The Stavka, the Soviet high command, therefore decided to pause the attack. In October 1944, the Soviets began planning an advance on Berlin that would finally put an end to

Nazism in Europe. Troops were reorganised and additional equipment was brought to the front, making the Red Army superior to the Wehrmacht in every way.

The advance towards Berlin took place in two stages. First, the Soviets proceeded on a broad front through the rest of Poland and across the original German border until they reached the River Oder. After a respite at the Oder, the marshals Zhukov and Konev then made the decisive thrust, directing their troops towards Berlin. The final battle awaited, where the head was to be cut off the snake.



In an overwhelming attack, the Soviets broke through the German lines.





The River Oder was the last bastion before Berlin. The natural defence was fortified by inexperienced soldiers.

winter attacks. *"Our training was immediately cancelled, we were given rifles and sent out to fight the Russians. Luckily, I was a radio operator, assigned to a battalion commander, so I escape being killed. We suffered enormous losses, though,"* recalled Reinhardt, who after a few weeks was moved to a new front:

"Our training was supposed to be resumed – we were studying to be officers – but that plan collapsed. Instead we were assigned to two newly formed divisions in the south-east of Berlin ... We were in the front lines, eyeball to eyeball with the Russians, but we felt ourselves to be inferior even then, because we were not particularly well equipped, had no heavy weapons.

"I had a direct confrontation with death, when the man operating the machine gun beside me was shot from only two metres away."

Fred Angerstein also experienced the Germans' weapon issues. He was armed with a useless rifle:

"We had carbines and the disadvantage with the 98 carbine was that we could load five rounds into the magazine, with one round in reserve, but we had to reload each time. I had this thing that was only

half-finished and I always had to hit it with a stone to get it to close, and finally it didn't work at all."

The lack of ammunition was another serious problem for the Germans, who had to economise with both cartridges and grenades. Conversely, the enemy used their guns eagerly, almost to demonstrate their superiority. At many positions, the Soviets routinely sent a rain of artillery down on the Germans in the morning and at noon – a phenomenon that Fritz began to refer to as *morgenkonzerten* and *middagskonzerten* (morning and midday concerts).

The show of strength helped create panic in the German camp and drove the soldiers to flee – especially when the enemy attacked with tanks and foot soldiers, as happened to Angerstein:

"The Russians stormed our front lines, our positions, and we ran off, retreated with everything we could carry. There were many deaths. One man ran beside me carrying an anti-tank grenade. I said, 'Throw the thing away!' 'I'm not allowed to, I can't,' he replied. I said again, 'Throw the bloody thing away.' He ran on and at last threw the grenade away, but he was shot, fell down and was certainly dead. My comrade said to me, 'You're bleeding here.' I'd ►



been shot through the uniform but I hadn't noticed it. We came to a cemetery, where we hid ourselves behind the gravestones," recounted Angerstein, who was captured by the enemy a few days later.

In early February, as the thaw set in, many German soldiers fought their way back to the west. The young, inexperienced soldiers, placed in newly established units, found it particularly difficult to sustain morale.

"The regular units are strong. The discipline and fighting spirit are good. But in the hastily thrown-together battle groups, the situation is totally different. Discipline is terrible and as soon as Russian troops appear, the soldiers panic and run from their positions," noted a German lieutenant.

The escape through the increasingly muddy terrain was on the western side of the River Oder, which meandered just 70-100 km east of Berlin. Soon the Germans were fighting their way across the water of the natural line of defence, where civilians stood ready to meet them on the west bank of the river.

One resident of the town of Lebus described how on 3rd February, numerous German soldiers swam between the ice floes across the river and took refuge

in the locals' houses. A café became a gathering point for soldiers who had escaped, but there was a shortage of food, so residents took hot drinks and food there.

The German soldiers who could not make it across the Oder sometimes tried to hide from the advancing Soviets by concealing or disguising themselves. A report from the Soviet rearguard said they had found a group of eight women in a haystack, but a perceptive sergeant discovered that the housewives were in fact German soldiers in women's clothing.

For Hitler, the poor defensive effort between the Vistula and the Oder was a disgrace. The Führer now demanded punishment for any dishonourable soldiers.

Hitler ordered cowards killed

It was a furious Hitler who in February found out that the Wehrmacht had been beaten back several hundred kilometres to the Oder in just 22 days. Zhukov's troops had even captured a few bridgeheads on the western side of the river, the most important being west of the town of Küstrin near the Seelow Heights. Fortunately for the Germans, however, Stalin ordered his eager marshal to stop, so that

FACTS

Survivors of the approximately 6,000-7,000 Germans sentenced to death in the mobile court martials had to wait a long time for justice. It was only in 2002 that the Nazi-decreed **sentences for desertion were annulled.**



Zhukov did not risk advancing too quickly towards Berlin, leaving himself vulnerable on the northern flank, where East Prussia and Pomerania were still not secure. Too rapid an advance could also create problems with supply lines.

Hitler was, of course, unaware of Stalin's temporary hiatus, so the Führer was still keen for his own soldiers to sacrifice themselves to stop the enemy. And he believed he could provide the right motivation by the threat of punishment and even death for dereliction of duty.

"Military tribunals should take the strictest possible measures based on the principle that those who are afraid of an honest death in battle deserve the mean death of cowards," a February order said.

On 9th March, the establishment of the *Fliegende Standgericht*, a mobile court martial, was officially introduced to terrorise any weak links at the front. It consisted of three high-ranking officers who could try any soldier and promptly execute him if he had engaged in behaviour that could be interpreted as treasonous – for example, if the soldier had fled the front. Thousands lost their lives in this way, including

innocent men who had simply lost contact with their unit in the heat of battle. Between 6,000 and 7,000 death sentences were handed down by the mobile tribunals, and immediately carried out. Seventeen-year-old Helmut Altner experienced the swift execution of the *Standgericht* when he arrived at a barracks in Spandau as a new conscript in March 1945. While Altner and other recruits were standing in the yard, a car carrying three captured German soldiers drove into the barracks yard, where a court-martial officer and firing squad were already present.

"Sentenced to death by shooting. The appeal for clemency has been rejected," the officer stated in front of the prisoners. Young Altner never forgot what he saw next: *"The condemned men have hung their heads. The youngest is 18, the others not much older ... They are fastened to the posts with leather straps ... The firing squad takes aim. 'Goodbye, comrades!' a high-pitched voice calls out and then the officer's shining dirk drops. 'Fire!' Suddenly all the posts are empty and blood runs from the wood as if it itself has been killed. The doctor checks the shot men. The little one raises himself once more and ►*

Soviet soldiers stormed across the River Oder in everything from boats to cobbled-together rafts made from pieces of wood.

German pilots flew suicide missions

In a last desperate attempt to stop the Red Army's advance towards Berlin across the River Oder, Hitler deployed kamikaze-style pilots. However, the Third Reich's final hope crashed and burned.

Like the Japanese in the Pacific War, the Germans established a unit of suicide pilots whose tasks included plunging to their deaths to stop the Red Army at the River Oder. The pilots volunteered and had to confirm their agreement to the mission before the death trip:

"I hereby voluntarily apply to be enrolled in the suicide group as part of a human glider-bomb. I fully understand that employment in

this capacity will entail my own death," was the statement signed by pilots who were accepted into the so-called Leonidas squadron. In the latter half of April 1945, the pilots were deployed to the River Oder, where the German suicide pilots were to crash into Soviet pontoon bridges.

Although the Germans had tried to develop various types of special suicide aircraft, the missions were mainly flown by the remaining

Messerschmitt Bf 109 and Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighters, which were fuelled only for the short trip to the target and loaded with a 500-kg bomb. However, the suicide raids brought little in the way of results. The unit claimed to have destroyed 17 bridges across the Oder, but the true figure was probably just two – a railroad bridge at Küstrin and a pontoon bridge at Zellin. At a high cost, because 35 pilots – and planes – were lost during the missions.



German suicide pilots manned the few fighter planes left in the Third Reich, sacrificing their lives in hopeless missions.

blood flows from his mouth. The doctor puts his pistol to his temple and presses the trigger. The shot sounds muffled. Sharp orders ring out and the firing squad withdraws. I have a bitter taste in my mouth and, as we march back, we all look unnaturally pale."

The young recruits had seen with their own eyes what awaited those deemed cowards, but the terror inflicted on German soldiers was also evident on the main route between Müncheberg and Küstrin, west of the Oder. Here the victims of the Standgericht hung dangling from roadside trees. There, as in many other places behind the Oder front, Hitler's new checkpoints in the form of military police and SS patrols were responsible for executing soldiers who appeared behind the front without a valid marching order.

Even high-ranking officers risked execution if they did not follow Hitler's orders to the letter and show true Nazi fighting spirit.

For Himmler, who'd always been an advocate of treating of people mercilessly, the pressure at the front

became too great. The Reichsführer fell ill with flu in mid-March, and when Guderian visited the patient, the two agreed that Guderian should tell Hitler that Himmler should resign as commander of Army Group Vistula. The reasoning was that Himmler was suffering from overload due to all his responsibilities.

At Guderian's request, 58-year-old Colonel-General Gotthard Heinrici was appointed as the new commander of Army Group Vistula on 20th March 1945. This, however, was the last time Guderian had the opportunity to influence Hitler. A week later, the chief of staff once again chastised the Führer for not providing the Eastern Front with sufficient resources, and the meeting turned into an argument, with the voices of the quarrelling men resounding through the Reich Chancellery bunker.

"Hitler became paler and paler, while Guderian became redder and redder," wrote Guderian's assistant, who noted that the spectacle ended with Guderian being fired. Heinrici deplored the sacking of

I tell you, all these men will be slaughtered at the front! Slaughtered! ■ Gotthard Heinrici, German general.

Guderian, but the dismissal came as no surprise to the Prussian colonel-general. It was a natural consequence of speaking out against Hitler. Nevertheless, the new commander of Army Group Vistula had made up his mind that he would not kowtow to Hitler. Heinrici had spent 40 years of his life in the army, so a mere corporal like Hitler was not going to boss him around. The grizzled Prussian was a military man to the core, and he knew full well that no German troops could prevent the fall of the Third Reich, even if Hitler still had illusions to the contrary.

Hitler clung on to dreams of victory

The desperate state of the Reich only became clearer to Heinrici as he and his operations chief, Colonel Hans-Georg Eismann, wound their way by car through the burnt-out, sooty streets of the capital, Berlin, on the afternoon of 6th April.

"So this is what we've finally come to – a sea of rubble," Heinrici said to Eismann as the car slowly approached the Reich Chancellery, where Hitler had called a conference attended by the Reich's top brass.

Looking at the capital's ruins, Heinrici shuddered to think that just over two weeks earlier, the Führer had issued an new order that would destroy even more of Germany. The Nero Decree dictated that anything that could benefit the enemy should be destroyed. If troops on the Eastern Front were pushed further back towards Berlin, bridges, factories and infrastructure were to be blown up and destroyed. In other words, if the order was carried out, the countryside between the Oder and the capital would soon be in flames.

On arrival, Heinrici and Eismann were led down to the basement of the Chancellery and out through an enclosed garden where a long concrete structure formed Hitler's new headquarters, the Führerbunker.

"Just think, three years ago Hitler had Europe under his command, from the Volga to the Atlantic. Now he's sitting in a hole under the earth," Heinrici exclaimed.

Himmler, Göring, Dönitz and Bormann – all the top Nazis – were present, and they raised their right arms stiffly and saluted with a *"Heil Hitler"* when the Führer appeared and sat down at the head of the table in a small meeting room in the Berlin bunker. Among these men, Eismann was proud of his boss, Heinrici:

"With his familiar stiff posture, serious and measured, he was a soldier from head to toe among court asses."

The earnest Heinrici was the first to report, and he refused to hide the seriousness of the situation on the Oder front from any of the Nazis:

"My Führer, I must tell you that the enemy is preparing an attack of unusual strength and unusual force," the general began, and then marked on a map the 120-km exposed front along the Oder.

"My Führer, I do not believe that the forces on the Oder front will be able to resist the extremely heavy

Russian attacks which will be made upon them ... I must tell you that ... there are no reserves. None ... [A]gainst the kind of attack we expect, every one of our divisions will lose a battalion a day ... We cannot sustain such losses. We have nothing to replace them with. My Führer, the fact is that, at best, we can hold out for just a few days."

A deadly silence filled the room until Göring suddenly broke it:

"I will place immediately at your disposal 100,000 Luftwaffe men. They will report to the Oder front in a few days," said the Luftwaffe's commander.

"My Führer, the SS has the honour to furnish 25,000 fighters for the Oder front," followed Reichsführer and SS chief Himmler, before naval commander Karl Dönitz also threw *"12,000 sailors"* into the pot.

"You have 150,000 men – about 12 divisions. There are your reserves," Hitler said, unconcerned, having conjured up another 13,000 men for a potential reserve army.

With all his combat experience, Heinrici was amazed that the senior Nazis around him thought the problem was solved and the new troops magicked up on paper could stop the enemy reaching Berlin:

"These men are not combat-trained. They have been in rear areas and in offices or on ships, in maintenance work at Luftwaffe bases. They have never fought at the front. They have never seen a Russian. I tell you, all these men will be slaughtered at the front! Slaughtered!"

The words had no effect on Hitler. The Führer simply threw his own ideas into the room, claiming that *"the main attack of the Russians is clearly not aimed at Berlin"* and, moreover, that *"faith and strong belief in success will make up for all these insufficiencies"*.

"You must radiate this faith! You must instil this belief in your troops! I tell you, colonel-general, if▶

The extreme pressure at the front caused Himmler (on the rostrum) to fall ill and hand over responsibility for his army group to someone else.



you are conscious of the fact that this battle should be won, it will be won! If your troops are given the same belief – then you will achieve victory, and the greatest success of the war,” Hitler declared to Heinrici.

The Prussian general gave up. He had just one last message for the Nazi top brass before he anxiously headed back to the front:

“I also cannot do anything about the terrible losses we must surely sustain. It is my duty to make that absolutely clear. It is also my duty to tell you that I cannot guarantee that the attack can be repelled. I must repeat – it is my duty to repeat – that hope and faith alone will not win this battle.”

Red Army prepared for final push

While Heinrici tried to establish the best possible defence on the banks of the Oder, Marshals Zhukov and Konev impatiently scrambled to launch the offensive. The two bald-headed warriors knew that the Americans had long since crossed the Rhine into western Germany, and although the Soviets in the east were much closer to Berlin, they did not want to share the glory with the Western Allies. The greatest trophy of all – Hitler’s bunker – had to be taken by the Soviets alone.

“The enemy will be crushed along the shortest possible route to Berlin. The capital of Fascist Germany will be taken and the banner of victory planted above it,” Zhukov declared to his troops.

The Red Army soldiers were as impatient as their commanders to get started on the last great offensive of the war, as the army propaganda service called the advance from the Oder towards Berlin. The Ivans were brimming with confidence and every one of them wanted to be among those who captured Berlin.

One soldier, confident of victory, wrote home to his family in the Soviet Union to report that he had marched into Germany a while ago and was now on one of Germany’s great rivers, only 65 km from Berlin. He was crossing the Oder, and from there it was only a short hop to the capital.

On the evening of 15th April, the last tanks and camouflaged trucks carrying ammunition and columns of soldiers poured onwards to the Soviet forward positions, but in the early morning of 16th April, complete silence reigned at the front.

“Everywhere the bank of the river was jammed with men and equipment and yet there was complete silence,” noted Captain Sergei Golbov, who was in a wooded area on the east bank of the Oder River, some distance north of the small town of Küstrin, where the officer was surrounded by *“swarms of assault troops, lines of tanks, platoons of engineers with sections of pontoon bridges and rubber boats”*.

“It felt like a huge spring about to be released,” another Soviet officer remarked, and as 03.00 approached, Marshal Zhukov was in position with his

field binoculars in a camouflaged observation post at the Soviet bridgehead at Küstrin. From there he could see the Seelow Heights to the west, where Heinrici’s defenders were dug in. A few minutes later, a roar sounded as the Soviet guns let rip.

“Immediately the whole area was lit by many thousands of guns, mortars and our legendary Katyushas,” Zhukov recalled. His artillery commander, Vasiliy Kazakov, was equally fascinated by the sight:

“It was an eerie picture, as along the whole front the muzzle flashes of tens of thousands of guns and the flashes of exploding shells burst into light. Particularly effective were the Katyusha rocket salvos. The basic power of this spectacle, which was much more frightening by night than by day, left an indelible impression.”

North and south of Küstrin, the shells drilled through the night, mercilessly pounding the landscape where the Germans lay in their defensive positions. Seventeen-year-old Helmut Altner, who just three weeks earlier had joined as a recruit in Spandau, where he had seen three soldiers executed, was already near the front and witnessed the artillery bombardment:

“We are woken in the middle of the night by the sudden shaking and shuddering of the earth beneath us. We are under heavy fire. We grab our things ... Heavy shells are passing over us and we can see each other’s tired faces whenever an explosion bursts and a flash of light hangs briefly in the night ... A vast red wall of fire rises up into the sky in front of us, clouds of smoke rising with it ... Fountains of dirt and iron erupt. We duck deeper in our trenches ... The shelling stops abruptly. Our ears are deafened and our abused eardrums have to accustom themselves to the silence.”

For Altner and his compatriots along the front, however, the silence was short-lived. In the Soviet camp, the quiet was quickly replaced by mass shouts from the embattled Ivans: *“Na Berlin!”* (“To Berlin!”)

Berlin lay just around the corner

From the forested area north of Küstrin, Captain Sergei Golbov also watched his excited troops rushing in a rage towards the Oder. Some of them were in such a hurry to cross the river that they didn’t wait for available boats, but simply plunged into the cold water in full uniform. Others clutched empty petrol cans and planks as they splashed along, kicking their legs to propel them.

“[It looked like] a huge army of ants, floating across the water on leaves and twigs. The Oder was swarming with boatloads of men, rafts full of supplies, log floats supporting guns. Everywhere were the bobbing heads of men as they floated or swam across,” Golbov recalled.

At the Küstrin bridgehead, where Zhukov was located, the Soviets had already crossed to the western side of the Oder. Therefore, the assault troops

RS-82 rockets were fired from the so-called Stalin’s organs.



The rockets had a range of almost 6,000 metres.

were supported by tanks from the start, and the advance towards the Seelow Heights proceeded superbly – partly because the initial bombardment had borne fruit:

"We moved across terrain cratered from shellfire. Everywhere lay smashed German guns, vehicles, burning tanks and many corpses ... Many of the Germans surrender. They don't want to fight and give their life for Hitler," Soviet Colonel Pyotr Sebelev wrote home on 16th April.

Sebelev and his compatriots ran into much stronger resistance over the next two days at the Seelow Heights, where the Germans were able to use the 60-metre-high plateau as a defence. In the end, however, this was only a minor bump in the road to Berlin for the Soviets, and the German troops had to abandon their lines of defence.

"I remember the depression that came over us as we moved back defeated and exhausted through the countryside," soldier Karl-Hermann Tams later recounted.

"The overwhelming might thrown against us had broken our backbone. Our regiment had ceased to exist as a regiment. It was the first time that I had experienced such a loss of self-confidence among our troops, as we recognised our powerlessness against this steamroller from the East."

Nor did 17-year-old Altner find much room for optimism: *"We are boys scarcely able to carry our packs, but we know how to die in our hundreds, in our thousands at the front, from north to south. We can scarcely believe that this can possibly end sometime."*

The German withdrawals from Seelow on 19th and 20th April left no clear front line.

As Heinrici had predicted, the defence lasted only a few days, and now discouraged stragglers withdrew as best they could to form small, improvised battle groups. But these units were no match for the advancing Soviets. Further south, Konev's troops also rushed forward, and thus the Red Army rapidly approached Berlin from the north, east and south.

So, when Hitler's 56th birthday was celebrated in the capital on Friday 20th April, it was not with the usual pomp and circumstance. Although Berlin's fanatical Nazis still hung swastika flags on bomb-shattered buildings to mark the Führer's birthday, Berliners were not in a celebratory mood.

In the streets of the capital, residents could clearly hear the thunder of Soviet artillery less than 50 km away. No longer could anyone be fooled by propaganda or Hitler's fanciful speeches. The fact was that the Red Army was right outside Berlin's gates. ■



Sinister fruit hung from the trees in the final days of the war, as the Nazis strung up German men and women for treason.



Our fellows were so
sex-starved that they
often raped old women
of 60, 70 or even 80.

Soviet commander of a tank company.

THE HOUR OF REVENGE

Eastern Front, spring 1945



Millions of panicked Germans fled the Red Army. They rightly feared being raped and attacked by vengeful Soviet soldiers.

The hour of revenge

As the Red Army surged into Germany, its soldiers exacted a cruel revenge against German civilians. Reports of mass rapes, crucifixions and the murder of infants spread like wildfire through Germany. Hitler ordered that no one was allowed to flee, yet old men, women and children began a dangerous escape.

By Troels Ussing

Fear could be seen in the eyes of every German in the easternmost part of the Reich in mid-January 1945. In some places, civilians could hear the ominous thunder of Soviet guns in the distance, and even in the areas a little further from the front, the inhabitants were far from reassured when they tuned in to the radio. There, radio commentator Hans Fritzsche spoke of *"a mass invasion, to be compared in scale and significance with the past comings of the Mongol hordes, the Huns and Tatars"*. According to Nazi propaganda radio, the German Reich had now become *"Europe's bulwark against the barbarian hordes descending from the eastern steppes"*.

Goebbels deliberately wanted to play on the fact that the enemies were Asian savages bent only on brutal and barbaric revenge. And for once, the minister of propaganda was not entirely wrong. In October 1944, the Red Army had entered East Prussian territory, and when German troops recaptured the area two days later, they saw that the enemy had committed atrocities against the civilian population in the village of Nemmersdorf:

"In the farmyard ... stood a cart, in which were four naked women, who had been strangled. To each of [a barn's] two doors a naked woman was nailed through the hands, in a crucified posture ... We found a total of 72 women, including children, and one old man, 74, all dead ... Amongst the dead we even found children in nappies. In one room we found a woman, 84, sitting on a sofa ... Her head was split in half to her throat with an axe or spade ... [Only few days later] did the medical commission arrive ... This foreign commission unanimously established that all the women, as well as the girls from eight to 12 years and even woman of 84 years had been raped," eyewitness Karl Potrek recounted after the war.

The Nemmersdorf massacre was used in German propaganda to stir up the population. But among the German civilians in East Prussia and the German settlers in western Poland who were near the front in January 1945, the information did not inspire either a fighting spirit or the will to stand up to the Red Army. On the contrary, they were terrified and wanted to escape the advancing enemy as quickly as possible.

"Dear Papa! We must escape ... by cart. From there on to the Reich by ship," a child had written in

chalk on the door of his home in an East Prussian town, hoping that one day his father would return from the war and see the message.

The child and the rest of the family were not the only ones to flee to western parts of the German Reich. From mid-January to mid-February 1945, some 7.5 million Germans left their homes in the eastern provinces to flee to the west. But far from all of them made it out alive. And many of those who survived were permanently scarred by the harsh winter cold and their encounter with the vengeful Soviets.

All thought of escape was forbidden

Although Germans in the eastern provinces wanted to flee from the advancing Red Army as quickly as possible, it was not that simple. Hitler had forbidden any escape unless the Gauleiter – the region's local leader – gave permission. Since most of these leaders were Nazis to the core, they were among those who firmly believed that the Soviets would not be able to break down the German defences. Therefore, they often stubbornly insisted that no one was allowed to leave until the Red Army was right on the doorstep.

In many places, civilians begged and pleaded with the local Gauleiter for permission to flee, because if they dared to leave their home towns without authorisation, they risked being shot for treason. When the enemy came too close, however, many saw no option but to travel west, permission or not.

"The local population fled from us. They were afraid of atrocities, and they were quite right to be," said a diary entry by Soviet soldier Vasily Ustyugov.

Since the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the Soviets had lost more than 26 million soldiers and civilians. The Germans had destroyed 1,700 Soviet towns and 70,000 villages, and had turned more than six million buildings into rubble – including 84,000 schools, 43,000 libraries and 40,000 hospitals. Soviet civilians had been bombed, shot, burned alive and gassed in concentration camps.

The so-called Ivans' thirst for revenge had not come from nowhere, and even high-ranking officials encouraged the troops to take revenge on the enemy. Among them was General Ivan Chernyakhovsky, who was very clear when he addressed his soldiers on the day of the Soviet attack in East Prussia:

"There will be no mercy – for no one, just as no mercy was given for us ... [We] are burning with

FACTS

By 1950,

12 million

Germans had been expelled from Central and Eastern Europe. The death toll during the purge is disputed but is estimated by historians to be between 500,000 and

2.5 million

hatred and thirst for revenge," the commander of the 3rd Belorussian Front exhorted his soldiers, while the usually well-mannered Marshal Alexander Vasilevsky expressed the same sentiment when one of his officers wanted to know how to react to the widespread rampage of his men.

*"I don't give a f**k. It is now time for our soldiers to issue their own justice,"* was Vasilevsky's cold reply.

As soon as Soviet reconnaissance scout Mikhail Baitman crossed the border, he saw how soldiers had been given free rein to make innocent Germans pay for the Wehrmacht's atrocities in the Soviet Union:

"Our unit made no distinction between enemy soldiers and civilians. One mile across the border we came across a corps commander – a general. One of our men said to him: 'What can we do with the [civilian] Germans?' He replied: 'Anything – it will be just retribution for the terrible crimes they have committed.'"

To Baitman, it was only fair that they could now let enemy civilians suffer: *"We shot unarmed civilians –*

we threw grenades into basements where women and children were sheltering. And we did it calmly ... The war had turned us into beasts. The Germans showed us how to behave like animals, and for three years they schooled us well, killing and raping all across our country. Now we were following suit. I was a Jew, and I had learnt all about their barbaric cruelty. I felt not a shred of pity – only hatred, a desire to kill every last one of them."

Escape took place in carts

With the vengeful Ivans surging across the border in East Prussia, which had been German since the Middle Ages, civilians near the front were scrambling to pack up their most precious possessions and flee. In East Prussia's capital, Königsberg, Gauleiter Erich Koch delayed the city's evacuation for a week, meaning that the inhabitants were not allowed to begin their flight west until 20th January.

In principle, the idea was that the evacuation would be organised so that the refugees would be taken to ►

The cruelty of the Germans on the Eastern Front was inhuman. When the Soviets entered Germany at the end of the war, they took bloody revenge.



Refugees attempted to travel by train away from the eastern part of the country to get far from the feared Soviet soldiers.

ports from where the German navy, the Kriegsmarine, would transport them on to safety. But the Red Army was already so close to Königsberg that people were fleeing in chaos on crowded routes to the west. For instance, long columns of civilians moved along the narrow spit of the Frisches Haff lagoon, where they were completely exposed and an easy target for Soviet pilots, who had no qualms about mowing down the refugees.

"We flew in groups of six planes over the Frisches Haff, west of Königsberg. We really worked that strip. And we turned so many people into mincemeat –

only God knows how many. Thousands upon thousands died. Tens of thousands of people were on that road – you just couldn't miss," Soviet pilot Yuri Khukhrikov recounted.

South of East Prussia, too, Gauleiters began allowing the German civilian population to leave after 20th January. German settlers in western Poland were busy emptying cupboards and drawers of their most important belongings and stuffing them into suitcases, which were piled on to wagons. Some had nothing more than prams or small carts, which they pushed and pulled through the deep snow. Women



and old men dragged themselves forward with screaming children at their side.

There were very few motor vehicles on the roads as the Wehrmacht and the Nazi Party had seized vehicles and fuel stocks. The better-off had horse-drawn carts at their disposal, but the crowds and the winter weather made it difficult to move quickly. Twelve-year-old Wilma Konrad was among the many from the Wartheland province in Poland who fled west with her family on 20th January as the snow fell.

"We didn't have a horse-drawn cart with a tarpaulin. Mother was frantic. She packed the

essentials and us five children into the cart and placed us under mattresses among food and feed for the animals. The horses were harnessed and mother sat at the front with our servant and we drove to the town about five kilometres away. It was freezing, between minus four and minus seven degrees. The town was a chaos of horses, carts and people. Accompanied by a neighbour, mother drove on until evening. The column stopped in a village. Children and horses were fed, and then we had to continue. We could already hear the thunder of guns. In the darkness, the servants had fled, so mother took the reins and drove on for a few days, with only short breaks," recalled Wilma, who had to look after her four younger siblings during the journey.

For most refugees like the Konrad family, the River Oder was their first destination. A local from Lubusz Land in western Poland was saddened to see the sorry sight of long lines of horse-drawn carts, wounded soldiers, women with prams and old men on foot carrying too much baggage moving west in the freezing cold. The refugees were often on the move for hundreds of kilometres, and with freezing temperatures down to minus 30 at night, the escape was a life-and-death struggle.

"At least we were young. We could cope with it better than the old," said a 20-year-old woman who survived the journey west but saw many older people succumb to the hardships.

At night, the refugees huddled together in barns and stables, trying to lie close together to keep warm. They been unable to take much food with them, so stomachs were constantly growling as they tried to sleep in the cold.

Daytime could be even worse, with the constant risk of horse-drawn carts slipping or getting stuck in the snow. Women sat on the sides of carts or on the edges of ditches, nursing their babies as the winter wind blew around them. The freezing weather created terrible scenes, and 12-year-old Wilma Konrad would forever remember the nightmare of the journey:

"The roads were very slippery. Many carts went into the ditch and overturned. A mother screamed and lifted up her frozen child. It was horrible to watch. We were hungry and cold."

Trains were salvation

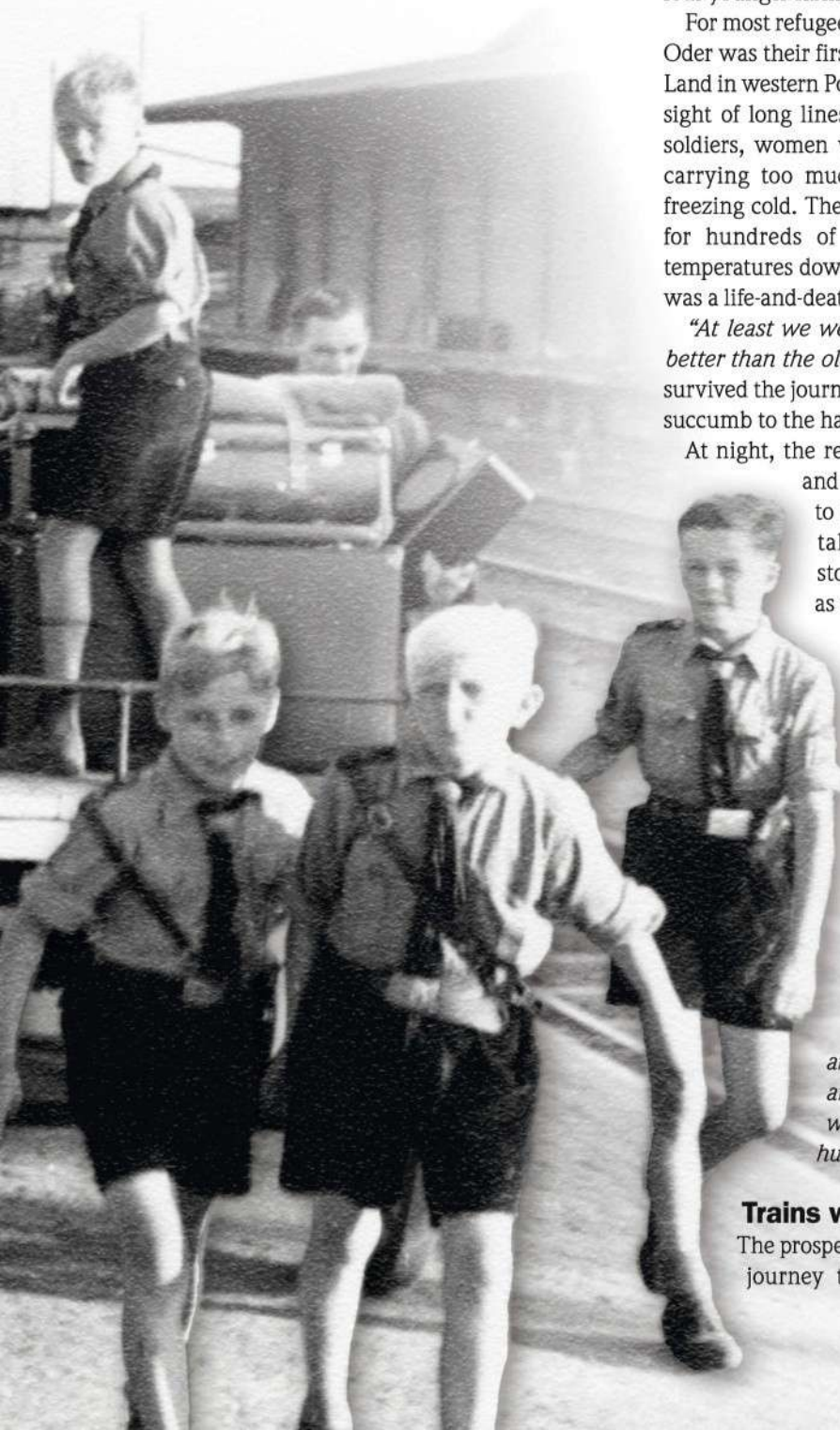
The prospect of an exhausting and dangerous journey through the snow meant that ►

FACTS

In 2000, it was estimated that around

20%

of the inhabitants of Germany were either refugees or descendants of refugees from the German-cleansed areas of Central and Eastern Europe.



many refugees gambled on travelling west by train. People fought their way to the nearest station in the hope of finding a seat on a westbound train – at best, all the way to Berlin, which was still considered safe.

With his mother and brother, Herybert Schulz trudged through half a metre of snow from their village of Politzig, 80 km east of Poznan, to the nearest station, where they were able to catch a train to the German capital. The Soviets were so close that the train stopped outside the station because a nearby bridge had to be blown up to halt the enemy.

After an hour of waiting, Herybert finally felt a tug on the train carriage as the engine set off westward –

just in time, for the Red Army reached Herybert's hometown shortly later. *"As darkness fell, we noticed that the sky was red in the direction of Politzig. At that time the Russians were already in Politzig and had set fire to the houses in the middle of the village."*

Once the Gauleiters had given permission to leave, the authorities sent evacuation trains. But the fuel shortage limited the number of departures, so the few trains that did run were packed. Thousands of refugees were left on the platform, watching their best chance of escape disappear into the distance.

The train journey was not without danger either. People were crammed like sardines into the carriages

WHY...

...Hitler forbade Germans to escape

Hitler ordered his commanders that the evacuation of refugees should only be allowed in emergency situations. The ban was intended to ensure that the Wehrmacht would fight on to the end.

Hitler was obsessed with keeping his soldiers' morale high and had no qualms about sacrificing civilians to do so. His instructions to the Gauleiters of the eastern provinces were therefore that they should only allow evacuations if there was no other option. The Führer's cynical calculation was that German soldiers would fight more fiercely if their families had to be defended, so civilians who so much as packed a

suitcase in their homes were to be punished, as it was considered detrimental to the morale of the armed forces. The punishment for breaking the ban was the same as if a soldier fled the front – execution.

For example, in Klessin on the River Oder, wealthy landowner Otto von Albedyll was told that he would be lined up against the wall and shot if he tried to do anything without permission. The decision to wait until

the very last moment to evacuate civilians was costly in human lives, but had some of the effect Hitler had hoped for, as many German soldiers went to great lengths to prevent attacks on civilians:

"Witnessing these atrocities had a very powerful effect on us. We grew extremely angry and resolved to hold out for as long as possible, to help our people evade the Russians," said Lieutenant Leopold Rothkirch.



In freezing January 1945, German soldiers prepared to defend East Prussia and elsewhere. Civilians were forbidden to flee, so the Wehrmacht would fight to the last.

“There was no time for pity. We were chasing hard after the Germans. ■ Sergei Shuiskii, tank commander.

with no light or heat. When an evacuation train rolled into the safety of Stolp in Pomerania on 20th January, pregnant Libussa von Oldershausen was at the station. As the train doors opened, she saw *“huddled shapes, rigid with cold, barely able to stand up any more and climb out; thin clothing, mostly in tatters, a few blankets over bowed shoulders; grey, hollow faces”*.

The passengers staggered out in silence, but not all had survived. Children had frozen to death.

“Out of the silence came the cries of a mother who did not want to surrender what she had lost. Horror and panic overcame me. Never had I seen such misery ... This was what was in store for us,” von Oldershausen noted – she correctly feared that Pomerania too would eventually fall into enemy hands.

Fifteen-year-old Waltraud Matthaei, her mother and two siblings were also among the many Germans hoping to be rescued by train. The family lived in the small town of Drossen (now Osno Lubuskie, in Poland), some 10 kilometres east of the Oder, and in late January they hurriedly loaded a sledge with suitcases and made their way to the railway station. But that was not the end of their evacuation:

“It took a long time before we could get on the train. Our whole family found seats in a large compartment, but because of the number of people, we couldn’t sit together. The train was overcrowded and all sorts of luggage blocked the aisle. We had gone only a few kilometres from Drossen when there was a terrible bang and the train came to a sudden stop. A glance out of the window revealed why. On the Reppen-Drossen road were three Soviet tanks, which had swung their guns around and were firing at the train. Panic broke out and everyone tried to get to the doors. There was a terrible crush. Children, everyone, attempted to get out. Many tried to jump out of the windows, and some succeeded, while others were fatally hit by the shots.”

In the commotion, Waltraud couldn’t see the rest of her family, so she followed the crowd as they made their way across a large open field towards a patch of forest where they could hide from the Soviets.

“We waded across the field, the snow reaching our knees in many places. All around us, bullets were hitting. Children were crying and screaming for their mothers. Again and again we got stuck in the snow and it was difficult to move forward. At the edge of the forest, I caught up with my 12-year-old brother. Exhausted, we took cover before going deeper into the safety of the forest. Little by little, we met other members of the family, but my seven-year-old little sister was missing. We asked if anyone had seen her, but to no avail. We were all scared and very worried.

“Shells even reached the forest and several people were injured. Fortunately, there was a doctor among the passengers who could treat the wounded. As darkness began to fall, we built a camp of twigs and



branches on the frozen snow. We were all so frightened that we didn’t get much sleep.”

Soviets caught up with refugees

Waltraud and her family were by no means the only ones to be overtaken by advancing Soviets tanks and soldiers, who, in their thirst for revenge, did not hesitate to mow down civilians. The armoured companies refused to be held back and ploughed ruthlessly through the stream of travellers, crushing horse-drawn carts under the caterpillar tracks.

“There was no time for pity. We were chasing hard after the Germans. Sometimes we ran over complete columns of refugees. I personally drove straight at a horse-drawn wagon full of civilians, tipping it into the ditch. I did not even stop to see if the women and children were alive or dead,” admitted tank commander Sergei Shuiskii after the war.

Everywhere on the edges of ditches lay victims who had either been run over or had succumbed to the frost. But the sight did not bother the Soviets.

“Sure, you look and you feel saddened by the sight of old people and children on foot and dying. But then you remember what they did in our land, and you feel no pity,” said one artillery commander.

The Soviet tank crews near Drossen had certainly shown no compassion when they fired first on the train carrying Waltraud Matthaei and then on the fleeing passengers. The 15-year-old German, along with her mother and brother, had spent the night in the forest, but they were all sick with worry about her missing younger sister: *“As the morning light broke through the trees, everyone decided to leave the forest together. With a white flag in front, the long procession of anxious people walked back to Drossen. We made it back to our house.”*

Waltraud spent the morning unsuccessfully searching for her sister in the town. At noon, she ►

The Soviet brutality was foreshadowed for the Germans when Nemmersdorf was taken in 1944 – 72 women and children were mercilessly slaughtered.

could see Soviet soldiers marching, cheering loudly, into Drossen. Nevertheless, she ventured out with her mother to the wrecked train in the afternoon:

"It was a gruesome picture that awaited us. Out of broken windows hung dead people, including children. They had been hit while fleeing. There were also many bodies lying on the ground among suitcases, prams and other pieces of luggage – total chaos. We walked through the entire train, constantly looking for my sister. We never found her. Discouraged, we returned to Drossen."

Wilma Konrad and her family were also caught up by the Soviets as they fled westwards. Her mother had whipped the horse-drawn cart forward for days, but when the family finally reached a bridge on the River Oder, they were too late:

"We reached Küstrin on 30th January. There were refugee columns everywhere, and everyone was streaming towards the bridge. But the Germans did not let us pass. The bridge was blown up and we were sent back to Schernow, 13 kilometres to the south-east. There we stayed in abandoned houses. Out of fear, we used only a few rooms."

Wilma, her mother and four young siblings had been cynically sacrificed in the Nazi plan to stop the Red Army at the Oder. Along with thousands of compatriots, they were now left behind with the Soviets east of the river. Just a few days later, the Ivans appeared:

"From our window we saw groups of Russians with fixed bayonets going from house to house. We were terribly frightened and shaking with fear. The door was thrown open and more Russians came roaring in. Some older men and boys aged 17-18 were chased out into the street. They also took several women and girls with them. This happened almost every day and night," recalled Wilma, who a few days later, on Soviet orders, had to walk 50 kilometres to another town with the rest of the surviving Germans. There, the group again sheltered in abandoned houses, where they were left hungry and had to find their own food.

Elsewhere near the River Oder, civilians were so surprised by the rapid advance of the Soviets that they barely had time to get dressed. A German soldier at the front was stunned when, near his position, he suddenly saw civilians running as Soviet artillery hammered away around them.

"Like figures from the Underworld, the refugees hurried past. Women, children, old people, surprised in their sleep, often only partially clothed. Only crying children, hanging on to their mothers' hands, looked with frightened eyes at the destruction of the world," said the soldier, who never forgot one of the passers-by: *"A woman, clad only in a dressing gown, which fluttered in the wind, staggered past. We could see the insanity in her eyes. She had a ▶*

During the Red Army advance in Prussia, soldiers found art treasures stolen by the Germans from the palace in Pushkin, near Leningrad, at the beginning of the war. The treasures were once again in Soviet hands.



The door was thrown open and more Russians came roaring in. Some older men and boys aged 17-18 were chased out into the street. ■ Wilma Konrad, German civilian.





“Panic and rumour-mongering are the Bolsheviks’ best friends,” said posters for the German inhabitants of Danzig, urging them to maintain discipline.

coffee-grinder in her hand, which she constantly turned. Her mouth moved, but we heard no sound from her,” said the soldier who could not leave his post to attend to the distraught woman. Her chances of escaping the Soviets were zero.

Mirrors were shot to pieces

In every town and village the Red Army took on their way to Berlin, looting of abandoned or partially abandoned properties followed. For the Soviet soldiers, German homes were a treasure trove that could be plundered with a clear conscience.

“It is only right that we should now take their possessions. They live luxuriously after all – the wealth and elegance of their homes is quite staggering. And our superiors turn a blind eye to our robbery – saying that the Germans have been stealing from us for more than three years. I am well satisfied,” wrote Lieutenant Vladimir Gelfand in his diary.

“Our soldiers wanted so many things,” said officer Fyodor Khropatiy. *“Clothes, watches and jewellery – some took whatever they could. In much of our country, living conditions were terrible. But they were also furious that such a wealthy country had*

invaded us in the first place. ‘With all these riches – what did they want from us?’ soldiers said. I saw men opening fire on furniture – machine-gunning wardrobes, sideboards and mirrors. They were totally enraged.”

A female Soviet military doctor also noted the soldiers’ need to destroy porcelain, musical instruments and other valuables that could not fit in their pockets on the onward journey to Berlin.

“You cannot imagine how many valuable things have been destroyed by the Ivans, how many beautiful and comfortable houses have been burned down. At the same time, the soldiers are right. They can’t take everything with them in this world or the other. And when a soldier breaks a wall-sized mirror, he somehow feels better. It’s a kind of distraction, loosening the general tension of the body and the mind,” the doctor wrote in a letter home.

Officers were better off in terms of appropriating larger and heavier items, as they could transport the loot in their cars, and they were also allowed to send home parcels weighing 10-16 kilograms.

Sometimes the officers went ahead to towns hastily abandoned by frightened, fleeing Germans to secure

the best loot. Lieutenant Boris Gorbachevsky was struck dumb with amazement when two of his superiors took him on a raid on a hotel in East Prussia:

"We entered a room and Shilovich walked up to some enormous windows, which filled the entire room with sunlight. Suddenly he began to tear down the velvet curtains. Grabbing a spare bag that he had brought along, he stuffed toiletries into it right down to the rolls of toilet paper – it was the first time I had ever seen toilet paper ... By now Aleksei Adamovich had pulled a knife from his bag and had set to work on a leather couch and two large leather armchairs ... Within several minutes, the leather had been stripped from the couch and the chairs, and then it was the turn of the paintings. Working swiftly and deftly, he cut the canvases and pulled the paintings from the frames ... I quietly observed the activities of the chief, not understanding what I should do or how I should behave. But he suddenly pounced on me:

"Why are you standing there like a puppet? ... Why did you think I brought you along with me? So you could take a few things for yourself. Send them to your Mama!" Then, still finding myself in something of a trap, I also took a few things: a colourful, wooden children's inkstand; two dressing gowns, a man's and a woman's; a portable typewriter; and two rolls of toilet paper. I slept badly that night.

"Although I had taken some trifling things, in reality I had been no different from the colonel. How easily – in just an hour – did all my lofty principles come crashing down. I vowed that such a thing would never happen again with me."

Few Soviets had the moral scruples of Gorbachevsky. From January and for three months after, tonnes of stolen goods were transported back to the Soviet Union. The post office in the city of Kursk alone received 50,000 parcels and boxes from the soldiers' raids.

Countless rapes

While the looting cost the Germans only material goods, the Soviets' ▶

German civilians living in the eastern regions were so terrified of the Soviet advance that many wrote to relatives to say they were contemplating suicide. In a letter to her sister, a woman named Helene described her dark thoughts from the town of Görlitz in Silesia.

Germans expressed suicidal thoughts in letters

Görlitz, 24th January 1945

Dear Trude!

Thank you for your last letter. I'm desperate, what's to happen if the Russians keep advancing further? Maybe we have to leave Görlitz, but where to go? Would you possibly take me in? If I could only find the courage to put an end to my life, then all fear and worry would be over, but it is not that easy. Maybe God will give me the strength and the courage to do that. If at least the winter would be over. Görlitz is teeming with refugees, those poor, poor people. I'd very much like to take at least one person in, but I don't have any beds and my house is really very cold. If only God would help. Being without a home, that would be terrible.

On Tuesday 16th January Dresden suffered a heavy bombardment, did it not? Here in Görlitz were heard the firing of the guns. You have been spared? If a misfortune should meet you and I still have my home, then of course it is always open to you.

I have given your address to two residents, in case death should reach me. I would like to die so much, but only graciously and without suffering. I have a cold again, but it is the excitement. One moment I'm shaking with cold, and the next I'm glowing hot again. Give my address to two other places, so that we are mutually informed about everything. Will the war come to an end soon?

I hope you get this letter. Only postcards are supposed to be written. Please let me hear something soon and all of you are warmly greeted.

Your sister Helene

Görlitz, den 24.1.45.

Liebe Trude!

Ich danke für Deinen letzten Brief.

Ich bin ganz verzweifelt, was soll bloss noch werden wenn die Russen noch weiter vordringen. Wenn möglich müssen wir aus Görlitz auch noch fort aber wohin. Würdet Ihr mich evtl. aufnehmen? Wenn ich nur den Mut finden möchte, meinem Leben ein Ende zu machen, dann wäre alle Angst und Sorge überstanden, aber es ist nicht so leicht. Vielleicht gibt es doch der liebe Gott die Kraft und den Mut dazu, wenn wenigstens der Winter ein bisschen weniger wäre. Görlitz winnt vor Hunger, die Armen, armen Menschen. Ich möchte am liebsten auch eine einzelne Person aufnehmen, aber ich habe doch keine Betten und meine Wohnung ist doch so sehr kalt. Ach wenn der liebe Gott doch helfen möchte. Heimatlos sein, dass wäre doch ganz furchtbar. – Am Dienstag den 16.1. hatte doch Dresden einen schweren Fliegerangriff, nicht wahr? Wir haben es hier in Görlitz abends so recht schiessen hören. Ihr seit doch verschont geblieben? Wenn Euch ein Unglück treffen sollte und ich habe noch mein Heim, dann steht es natürlich Euch immer offen.

Ich habe Eure Adresse an zwei Hausbewohner gegeben, falls mich der Tod ereilen sollte. Ich möchte ja so gern sterben, aber nur gnädig und nicht leiden müssen. Ich bin wieder erkältet, aber es ist die Aufregung. Einmal schüttelt es mich vor Kälte und dann wieder ist mir glühend heiss. Gib auch meine Adresse an zwei andere Stellen, damit wir gegenseitig über alles unterrichtet sind. Ob es nicht jetzt bald zum Kriegsende kommt?

Hoffentlich bekommst Du diesen Brief. Es sollen doch nur noch Postkarten geschrieben werden. Lass bitte bald etwas hören und sei mir zusammen herzlichst gegrüßt von Deiner Schwester

Helene.

Hat Margot nun wieder Nachricht von Ihrem Mann? Wo ist Trautelt?

"It was no big deal if a soldier raped a woman, or even a girl. On the contrary, men boasted. ■ Soviet officer.

With the town burning, the people of Kolberg desperately sought a ship to take them to safety.

human predation had a much higher price. From the start of the Soviet offensive, German women had feared falling into the clutches of the Ivans – not least because of the atrocities in Nemmersdorf, where both young and old had been raped. Unfortunately, the Red Army lived up to its reputation as it thundered westwards. Soviet war correspondent Vasily Grossman followed the army in Wartheland, Poland, and was ashamed on behalf of his people.

"Horrible things are happening to German women," observed the Soviet correspondent in Schwerin an der Warthe, where he wrote short reports on the atrocities committed by the soldiers: "Women's

screams are heard from open windows ... An educated German whose wife has received 'new visitors' – Red Army soldiers – is explaining with expressive gestures and broken Russian words that she has already been raped by ten men today. A German woman dressed in black, with dead lips, is speaking in a barely audible rustling voice. She has brought with her a teenage girl with black, velvety bruises on her neck and face, a swollen eye, with terrible bruises on her hands. This girl was raped by a soldier from the army headquarters signals company ... A story about a breast-feeding mother who was being raped in a barn. Her relatives came to the barn



and asked her attackers to let her have a break, because the hungry baby was crying the whole time."

Grossman's depictions could have come from anywhere on the Soviet road to Berlin. Nowhere was safe for German women when the Ivans caught up with them. In fact, the soldiers felt it was their right to assault the women in revenge for the German soldiers' animalistic behaviour in the Soviet Union.

"It was no big deal if a soldier raped a woman, or even a girl. On the contrary, men boasted to each other how many women they had taken. It was almost considered 'heroic' or 'courageous' to have had a whole series of women. And if someone was

murdered, well, 'it was war'," said one Soviet officer about the rapes.

One tank company commander even boasted that *"two million of our children were born"* in Germany, and a major claimed, *"Our fellows were so sex-starved that they often raped old women of 60, 70 or even 80 – much to these grandmothers' surprise, if not downright delight."*

Every time the Ivans came to a new town, they searched for women. And when they found their victims, there was little interaction before the assault.

"They do not speak a word of Russian but that makes it easier," a soldier wrote home to his friend ►



Ship with 10,000 on board was torpedoed in the Baltic Sea

More than 9,000 Germans lost their lives when the refugee ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* was sunk by a Soviet submarine in the Baltic Sea. The sinking remains the worst maritime disaster in history.

Although Hitler had not allowed the Germans in East Prussia to flee to the west, the Nazis tried to help refugees escape via ships in the Baltic Sea. On 23rd January 1945, ten days after the major Soviet offensive began, naval commander Karl Dönitz ordered the launch of Operation Hannibal, in which ships would transport refugees either to German territory or to occupied Denmark.

Unfortunately, the rescue operation suffered the worst shipping disaster in history when the

Wilhelm Gustloff left the port of Gotenhafen (now Gdynia, Poland) on 30th January with over 10,000 people on board.

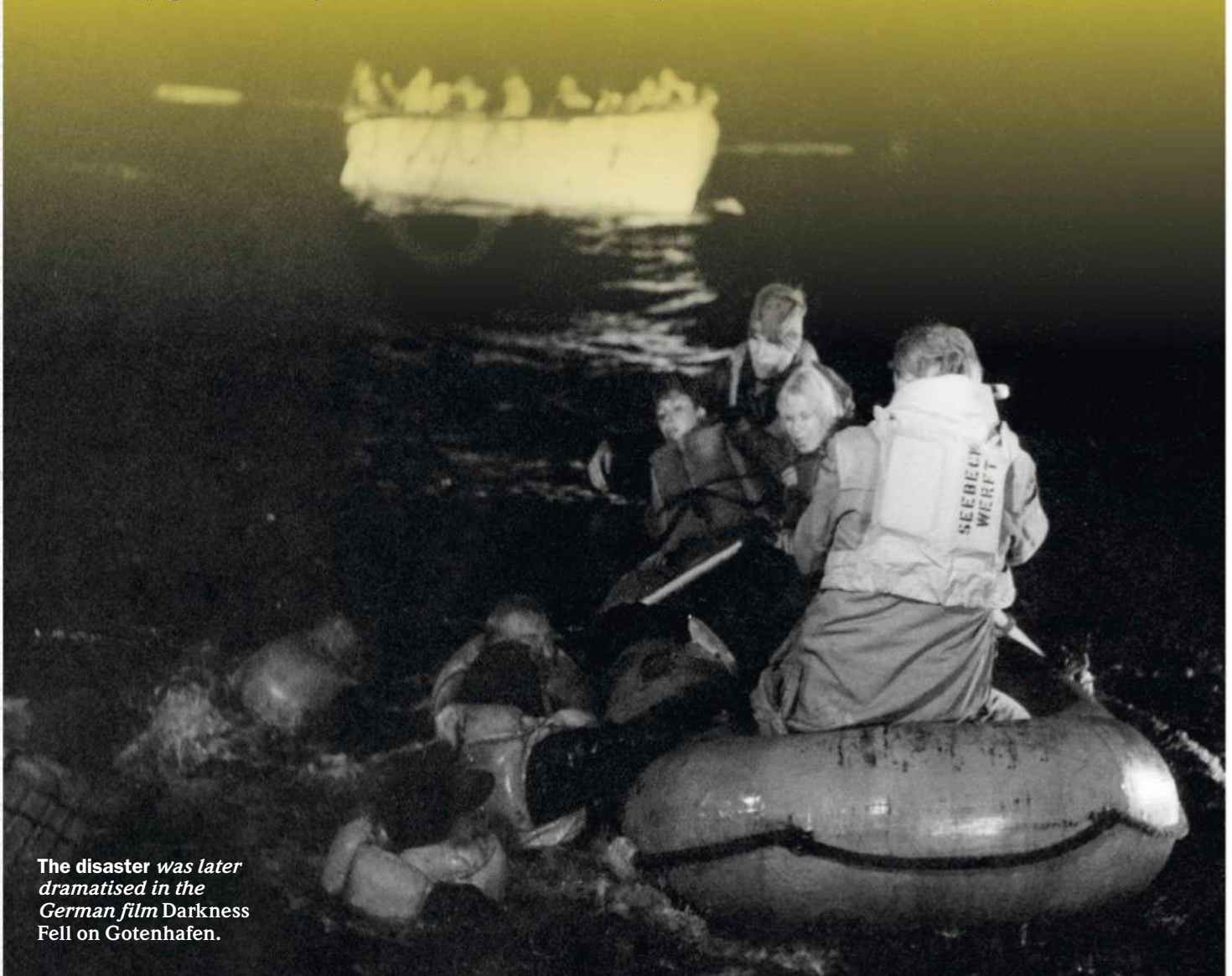
Cold rendered lifeboats useless

The refugees and wounded German soldiers were relieved to escape the Red Army, but a Soviet submarine was lying in wait and its captain, Alexander Marinesko, fired three torpedoes into the ship's hull at 21.16.

The severe cold of minus 18 degrees Celsius had frozen several of the ship's lifeboats, and

many of the boats that eventually entered the water capsized due to panicked refugees hitting the vessels as they jumped overboard. The *Wilhelm Gustloff* sank in less than an hour and probably took more than 9,000 people into the depths, although the exact number of passengers is unknown.

The Soviets sank other refugee ships, yet over 15 weeks, 800,000 German civilians and 350,000 soldiers were transported across the Baltic Sea to Denmark and German regions in the west as part of Operation Hannibal.



The disaster was later dramatised in the German film *Darkness Fell on Gotenhafen*.

in February 1945. *"You don't have to persuade them. You just point a Nagant [pistol] and tell them to lie down. Then you do your stuff and go away."*

Although the Soviets preyed on women of all ages, young ones were particularly vulnerable. Many covered themselves in soot and dirt in an attempt to avoid the soldiers' attention. By stuffing pillows under their clothes and pulling scarves around their heads, they tried to look like fat old women. Painting red dots on their faces and pretending to suffer from highly contagious typhus was another panicked attempt to escape the abuse. However, neither old age nor illness was a guarantee against rape.

In most places, women tried to hide when they heard the Soviets coming. That's what Emma Korn did when the front units of the Red Army roared into her hometown. But the Soviets were experienced in finding victims and knew to look in attics and cellars.

*"They came into the cellar where we were hiding and pointed their weapons at me and the other two women and ordered us into the yard. In the yard 12 soldiers in turn raped me. Other soldiers did the same to my two neighbours. The following night six drunken soldiers broke into our cellar and raped us in front of the children. On 5th February, three soldiers came, and on 6th February eight drunken soldiers also raped and beat us,"*said Emma Korn.

Even as the Soviets advanced past the columns of refugees, a cruel fate awaited the women. Officer Leonid Rabichev described the atrocities he saw his compatriots committing on the roadside:

"Women, mothers and their children lie to the right and left along the route and in front of each of them stands a raucous armada of men with their trousers down. The women who are bleeding or losing consciousness get shoved to one side and our men shoot the ones who try to save their children."

For Major Lev Kopelev, the attacks became too much. It was difficult for him to stop the abuse because many other officers condoned the crimes, but when Kopelev found a mother and her 13-year-old daughter in the East Prussian town of Allenstein who had been repeatedly raped by Red Army soldiers, he took them to safety. However, such a gesture was unusual.

Many Germans chose suicide

The fear of being abused became so great among the German women that many chose to take their own lives. After Emma Korn was gang-raped, she and her neighbours attempted to commit suicide by slitting their wrists and those of their children, but were stopped by Soviet NKVD rearguards tasked with interrogating captured civilians.

The Red Army soldiers saw thousands of cases where female civilians had chosen to kill themselves and their children before the vengeful Ivans appeared. Lieutenant Boris Gorbachevsky, who had felt so guilty



The escape across the Baltic saved thousands of German refugees from falling into Soviet soldiers' hands.

about stealing things from a hotel, heard about the phenomenon as he was heading west in East Prussia.

*"Soldiers from the 23rd Artillery Division stumbled upon a shed containing 11 children from the ages of two to 15 years, and four women about 40 years old – some of their throats had been slashed, while others had slit wrists. Those who were still barely alive refused all medical help: better to die than to wind up in Russian hands,"*wrote Gorbachevsky.

In Wartheland, Poland, the sight was just as common. There, however, a Soviet officer convinced himself that the suicides were not due to fear of the Red Army, but something else entirely:

"We found suicides – women who had taken cyanide on hearing news of our approach and administered it to their children. We were shaken when we witnessed this – it seemed the final proof of their terrible hatred towards us."

The fact that the women's desperate choices had nothing to do with hatred, but were motivated solely by a deep-seated fear of the Ivans, was the experience of ten-year-old Adelheid Nagel. She was living with her mother in the village of Wildenhagen in Silesia, where the inhabitants had not received permission to leave in time. Panic broke out when, on 31st January, a woman suddenly shouted:

"The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!"

One neighbour screamed that she was going to take her children to the lake and drown them and herself. About 15 panicked women who'd gathered together chose instead to follow someone else's advice:

"Everybody hang themselves!"

Adelheid was the only child among the women, and the 10-year-old watched in horror as ropes were tied across the beams in a loft. Her mother tightened the noose around Adelheid's neck and told her it wouldn't hurt. The girl watched the adults kick away the chairs below them, making them dangle in the ►

FACTS

The NKVD was the Soviet Union's interior ministry. Among other things, **NKVD commissars kept order** in the Red Army and were responsible for gathering intelligence about internal and external enemies.



The PPSH-41 submachine gun was used in large numbers by Soviet soldiers.

The weapon was a copy of the Finnish Suomi M-31, which had been a major thorn in the Soviets' side during the Winter War.

The Soviets produced a total of five million of these guns during the war.

air until they fell silent. Adelheid's mother also went quiet but her daughter could not bring herself to do it:

"I was half hanging from a rope that cut into my throat if I relaxed my legs. Every time I got dizzy, I stood up properly again." The 10-year-old girl stayed standing until the morning, when a Soviet soldier arrived. He untied the rope and led Adelheid into the courtyard while the dead women were cut free.

The largest mass suicide took place in Demmin, Pomerania, where more than 900 drowned themselves while the Soviets ravaged the town. In the following weeks, bodies were seen floating in the River Peene. But the macabre sight was surpassed on the Oder, where German soldiers realised the lengths to which mothers would go to keep their children from falling into the Red Army's hands. A group of soldiers saw sacks floating in the river and set out to investigate. When they opened the first, they gasped. Inside was a dead infant. The other sacks contained more.

Communist was battered to death

For some Soviet soldiers – such as Boris Gorbachevsky – it became unbearable to witness the daily atrocities committed by the Ivans, which caused civilians to kill themselves and their children. He understood the rage of his countrymen, but it had turned into a veritable orgy of violence against the locals:

"If we are to be honest, all sorts of things took place: brutality, sadism, cynical crude acts, unbridled lust and at times even murders ... [It] turned into blind hatred, and it became almost impossible to stop this massive upwelling of malice."

The senseless and cold-blooded killings by soldiers particularly bothered Gorbachevsky. The lieutenant experienced such a brutality when his unit drove into a town where *"not a single soul was visible"* and he could only *"hear the barking of dogs"*.

"Then unexpectedly a tall, hale old man hopped out of a partially destroyed building, holding some sort of booklet in his outstretched hand, and with joyful exclamations, he rushed to meet our column. One of the Red Army soldiers, who didn't understand German words, without pausing to try to figure out

what the German was saying, with all his might smashed the German's head with his rifle butt. Bleeding heavily, the old man fell to the pavement. As the column marched past the prostrate man, more soldiers joined to taunt him as much as possible and to finish him off – they kicked him with their boots, stabbed him with bayonets, then spat on the corpse."

The paper the German had waved turned out to be a membership booklet for the German Communist Party. Gorbachevsky was ashamed and turned to the soldier who'd smashed the man's head with his rifle:

"Why did you kill him? He plainly was not a soldier, and there was no way he could have harmed us. An old man, a communist."

"To me, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, they are all the same," the soldier replied. *"Just scum. I won't find any peace until I kill a hundred of them. You'd better ask yourself how you wound up so alone in your opinion."*

For Gorbachevsky, the answer was discouraging.

"How many more Germans would they have to kill, humiliate and tear to pieces in order to soothe their grief, dull their hatred, thaw their icy souls and find inner peace?" the lieutenant wrote.

But as the Soviets pushed further and further into Germany, more Red Army soldiers began to disagree with the humiliation and abuse of civilians.

"We were fighting against the Wehrmacht and the SS, not unarmed women, children and old men," declared Captain Anatoly Mereshko, but even lower-ranking soldiers, such as infantryman Grigory Pomerants, had had enough when, on his way west, he saw the body of a naked young German woman thrown with indifference on top of a rubbish heap.

"Was it us who had done this? And if so, who? Suddenly an entire layer of hatred towards any German was stripped away from me," wrote Pomerants, who later became a philosopher.

War photographer Yevgeny Khaldei, like most Ivans, had been full of hatred when he crossed the border. The Wehrmacht had killed the photographer's father and three sisters by throwing them down a mine shaft in Ukraine, yet his desire for revenge was dimming day by day as the Soviet advance continued:

"When I came across German civilians, and saw the terrible state they were in, my rage began to fade. To my surprise, I even felt sympathy for them. I began to comprehend that Germans could also be victims, that the war might be terrible for everyone."

The German refugees certainly were victims. Of the 7-8 million who fled or attempted to do so, over a million perished. And while Soviets such as Gorbachevsky and Pomerants abhorred the violence against civilians and wanted it to end, that wasn't the case for the majority. Most of the Soviet troops were still fuelled by a deep-seated hatred of the enemy. And they would not satisfy their bloodlust until Berlin was captured and laid to waste. ■

MEANWHILE

USA:

- Roosevelt is sworn in as president after re-election.

HUNGARY:

- The former Axis state declares war on Germany.

BELGIUM:

- Battle of the Bulge ends in German defeat.



Children acted as draught animals as the Germans tried to save what they could. In 1945, refugee carts filled the cityscape.

Generals feared Hitler's vengeance

By Troels Ussing

Even when defeat was inevitable, German generals fought on without openly questioning Hitler's increasingly irrational decisions. According to renowned historian Sir Ian Kershaw, this was due not only to a sense of duty, but also because of the fear of personal reprisals.

Why did German officers remain loyal to Hitler for so long?

Before the war, they had supported rearmament and backed German aggression in central Europe. Some generals were initially fearful of war with the Western powers, but the huge victory over France in 1940 erased any doubts over Hitler's military leadership. They had also taken an oath of loyalty directly to Hitler, and many of the lower ranking officers had been indoctrinated in Nazi values for years.

When did dissatisfaction with the Führer first start to be expressed?

The first real signs began to emerge after the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, when there were disagreements over future strategy. Discontent began with the failure of the German offensive in the Caucasus and culminated in the disaster at Stalingrad in 1942-43, which marked a major turning point in the war.

Which generals and staff members criticised Hitler the

most and what did they do to voice their discontent with his decisions?

In the autumn of 1942, criticism was voiced in the circles in which the military operations took place and by generals who were completely loyal to Hitler but who had simply been put in a situation where they'd been made to follow impossible orders. Chief of Staff and General Franz Halder was sacked at this point. Hitler's ultra-loyal military adviser, General Alfred Jodl, was also criticised for supporting the negative assessment of the German army's capabilities in the Caucasus made by the commander on the ground, Field Marshal Wilhelm List. However, criticism wasn't manifested in the form of outright opposition. The generals continued to accept Hitler's right to make decisions, no matter how damaging they were.

When did disgruntled officers gain the courage to stand up to Hitler in earnest?

As pointed out, Halder and Jodl were among those who confronted Hitler directly over strategy and tactics. But their objections were not a fundamental opposition to Hitler as the Führer of Germany. Due to the dictatorial nature of the regime, any defiance had to be carried out in extreme secrecy because open criticism of Hitler was extremely risky. The first manifestation of real



IAN KERSHAW (born 1943)

Sir Ian Kershaw is Emeritus Professor of Modern History at the University of Sheffield. Considered one of the world's leading experts on Hitler, Kershaw has written several books on the Third Reich, including *Endgame*, which examines why the Nazis kept fighting until May 1945 when the war was effectively lost.



resistance arrived with the plans to kill Hitler, which senior officers in Army Group Centre began to devise in early 1943. Their first attempt was the failed assassination attempt by Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg in July 1944.

How did the failed coup affect Hitler's relationship with his generals?

Whatever arguments there had been over strategy and tactics, Hitler never imagined that army officers would try to kill him. The failed assassination attempt inevitably reinforced his distrust of the officer corps and, in particular, the leadership of the general staff and army reserve – the main agent behind the coup attempt – which now came under the control of SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler.

How were the disaffected generals affected by Hitler's new pathological distrust of the army?

After the assassination attempt, all officers were naturally anxious to demonstrate their loyalty and tried their best to avoid actions that could be perceived as anti-Hitler. Disagreements over tactics and strategy continued, but any personal feelings that individual generals harboured were suppressed. Not only for fear of the consequences, but also because of their strong sense of duty to the defence of the country – a duty that in practice inevitably meant support for the regime.

What was loyalty to Hitler like in the final months before the fall of Berlin, when the generals knew the war was lost?

Insubordination still only occurred in extreme situations. In other words, in desperation, when it was more than obvious that blindly following Hitler's orders would result in disaster for the military units involved. ■

To the death for Hitler.
Until the very end, generals sacrificed the lives of thousands of young German men in a hopeless attempt to win the war for Hitler.



During the last days of the war, Hitler forced young boys with downy upper lips into uniform. Equipped only with old rifles, it was down to them to win the war.

SACRIFICED FOR HITLER

I found a mere child in a uniform many sizes too big for him ... Tears were running down his face.

Dorothea von Schwanenflügel, Berlin resident.

Sacrificed for Hitler

In 1945, senior Nazis were so desperate that they deployed boys as young as 12 as well as older men to defend Berlin. With his usual theatrical flair, Hitler called the unit the Volkssturm, but the new army unit was merely the reserves' reserve, and they were now to be sacrificed as cannon fodder in the Nazis' death throes.

By Troels Ussing

In autumn 1944, the casualty figures landing on Hitler's desk were disturbing. Between June and November 1944, the army and the SS counted no fewer than 1,457,000 lost soldiers between them. As many as 106 divisions had either been wiped out or disbanded so the men could be deployed in other units. Still, the Führer and his faithful lackeys were confident. True, the army had already called up every able-bodied man between the ages of 17 and 45, but they could manage. The Nazi top brass decided to draft young boys as young as 16 and mature men up to the age of 60 into a newly created militia. The *Volkssturm* – People's Storm – would help Hitler defend the homeland and achieve final victory.

"Once again by the major effort of the power of our German Volk [we will guarantee] that the Reich, and thus Europe, will continue for years to come. While now the enemy believe that they are about to strike the final blow, we are resolved to carry out the great effort of our Volk. In the face of the well-known

desire of our Jewish-international enemies to exterminate us, we set the total commitment of all German people," Hitler proclaimed in autumn 1944.

The Nazis relied on young boys and untrained men to fill the gaps in the depleted German army.

"For freedom and life – Volkssturm" read Nazi propaganda posters in Berlin and other cities, while cinema newsreels were packed with scenes of eager men – young and old – marching shoulder to shoulder. The Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* (*National Observer*) also reported how Berlin's men had stepped up to the plate.

"As hundreds become thousands, thousands become tens of thousands, one battalion marches off after another. A revolutionary people's movement has emerged, ready to defend its homeland with weapons in hand," the columns read euphorically, with many Germans believing the stories that the *"courage of the German people"* would save the Reich.

"All the peoples of the world have hatched a plot against us, but we will show them what we are capable of. Yesterday there took place here the swearing of the oath for everyone from the district. You should have seen it. I will never forget the impression of strength and pride. We don't yet know when they will be sent into battle," one German woman wrote to her husband at the front.

Far from everyone, however, was enthusiastic about the fact that their sons, fathers and grandfathers, who had hitherto been exempt from service, were now to take the fight to the enemy. Before them stood battle-hardened and heavily armed troops thirsting for German blood. For many Germans, it was clear: the *Volkssturm* would struggle to make a difference and would pay dearly.

Volkssturm grew after winter offensive

Unusually, the administration of the *Volkssturm* was placed under the Nazi Party rather than the Wehrmacht. This was due to Hitler's lack of confidence in the army after a number of officers, led by Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, had attempted to assassinate the Führer in July 1944. Instead, Hitler's private secretary and head of the Party Chancellery, Martin Bormann, took the baton and decided that the units should be organised locally under the Nazi Gauleiters, who reported to him. In this way, Hitler



No one escaped. *Everyone from artisans to civil servants and business owners were enlisted in the new Volkssturm unit.*



The Panzerfaust was one of the only usable weapons issued to the Volkssturm troops.

and Bormann ensured that the Volkssturm was imbued with the ideals of the Nazi movement, because the Gauleiters were loyal to their leader:

"There is no other way but to go bravely forward. The men of the Volkssturm, led by the spirit of National Socialism, will not disappoint the Führer. He will find loyalty in our Volkssturm. The enemy will learn that our struggle will be fought with an iron will," said Gauleiter Paul Giesler.

Originally, the Volkssturm was not supposed to be sent to the front to fight. The idea was that the men would primarily operate in the hinterland, acting as reserves and helping with supplies. But when the Red Army surged across the German border during the winter offensive in January 1945, slaughtering Wehrmacht soldiers, Hitler did not hesitate to send his new militia into battle. The Führer needed even more men, so those who had previously been exempt because they were doing jobs that were essential to the war effort were also called up. One of them was Johann Schlee, who had been exempted from service as he ran a farm:

"During the night of 23rd to 24th January 1945, I was awakened by a loud knock on the door. When

I opened the door, two Hitler Youths were standing on skis in front of the door and brought me the party's position order. The wording was something like this: 'On 24th January at 08.00, you have to report to the high school in Rothenburg. Bring along warm woollen clothes, blankets and so on.'"

Proud teenagers pulled on uniforms

While Schlee wasn't looking forward to joining the Volkssturm, Hitler Youth teenagers, like the two who had delivered the summons to the farmer, were often more enthusiastic about joining the militia. For years they had been fed Nazi propaganda. Dressed in brown uniforms with swastikas and shiny leather boots, they had been taught party history, race theory and the principles of war, and on their many camping trips around Germany, they had dug trenches, thrown hand grenades and marched for hours. All this had turned many of them into fanatical Nazis, ready to fight to the last for the Fatherland and their Führer.

The fact that the 16-year-old boys of the Hitler Youth could wear the Volkssturm armband with the words "Deutscher Volkssturm – Wehrmacht" around their upper arms filled them with pride. Most ►

FACTS

The Hitler Youth was a Nazi youth organisation. After the Nazi takeover, membership became compulsory for boys and at its peak the Hitler Youth had **ten million members**.



Panzerfaust was Germany's trump card

The Volkssturm's main weapon was a cheap, single-shot device. With the Panzerfaust, they could disable the Soviets' otherwise superior tanks with little training.

The German bazooka – the Panzerfaust – was the Volkssturm's most important weapon. With it, even old men and young boys could take down the Soviets' feared T-34 tanks. However, the gunners themselves were often in great danger.

The Panzerfaust (armour fist) became a widespread weapon in the final stages of the war, when the Reich was short of both money and trained soldiers. The small weapon was cheap to produce and easy to

operate, so it was perfectly suited to the Volkssturm's motley collection of soldiers.

Members of the Volkssturm simply squeezed the Panzerfaust under their arm so the rear end of the tube protruded behind their body, then they could take aim and fire. Because part of the pressure of the propellant charge was conducted backwards through the tube after firing, the Panzerfaust was recoilless, which was handy when being fired by young boys and frail older men. However, the soldier had to

be careful that no one was behind him, as the backblast could cause severe burns.

The simple handling of the weapon, which required only a few minutes of training, helped to ensure success in the field, where Soviet T-34 tanks were disabled. The problem for the gunners was that the Panzerfaust was a single-shot weapon, so the warhead had to hit the target on the first attempt – especially as the large flame revealed where the gunner was hiding. Another disadvantage was that in some cases the Panzerfaust exploded the moment it was armed, killing the shooter on the spot.

THE SIGHTS had holes calibrated for distances between 30 and 150 metres. The Panzerfaust had to be fired within 50 metres of the target to be most effective.

A CAVITY in the front of the warhead helped to amplify the force of the explosion and concentrate the blast.

THE TIPS of the first Panzerfaust produced were arrow-shaped, which meant that the warhead often bounced off the sloping sides of the T-34 tank's armour instead of exploding. The problem was solved by making the tip wider and flatter.

SPRING STEEL FINS on the rear of the warhead unfolded as soon as it left the Panzerfaust's tube. The fins kept the explosive firmly on course towards its target.

THE CHARGE consisted of approximately 800 grams of high explosive – a mixture of TNT and trihexogen – which was enough to penetrate the steel armour of the T-34 tanks at their most vulnerable points. The Panzerfaust could not be reloaded and had to be discarded after the warhead was fired.



Cheap, small weapons like the Panzerfaust were distributed to Volkssturm members.

Some of the rifles were rusted, others were missing the safety catch or even the rear sight. ■ Johann Schlee, soldier in the Volkssturm.

wanted to do their best on the battlefield. But their enthusiasm could only slightly compensate for the lack of training and weapons that met all members of the Volkssturm. When the militia was announced in autumn 1944, the Nazis had wanted the new force to wear neat grey uniforms that would give the men a sense of community. In reality, resource-strapped Germany had neither the time nor the materials to make uniforms. Instead, the Nazis scraped together a mish-mash of alternative attire. Police, postal workers, tram conductors and even zookeepers had to donate their uniforms to dress the Volkssturm. But even that wasn't enough, and many members had to make do with their own jackets, leaving only the Volkssturm armband to show who they were.

There also weren't enough steel helmets, so the men turned up with their own hats and wore their own woollen clothes. As did Johann Schlee when he showed up on 24th January 1945, as ordered. And he wasn't the only one:

"When I arrived at the high school in a horse-drawn sleigh, sleighs with men came from all directions with the same goal. We were divided into groups. My group leader was a party member, an SA man who, as I soon realised, had no idea what soldierly behaviour was. As it turned out later, he also had no idea about a carbine and how to use it. The day passed with dressing and dividing."

Training was inadequate

Like Schlee, other men in the Volkssturm found the training severely lacking. The younger Hitler Youth members were slightly better off because they'd had weapons experience and were used to military duties, but if the older men had not fought in World War I, they knew little about warfare. Time was short, however, and they often only had one or two days of training with a Panzerfaust or an old rifle – usually without ammunition, because bullets had to be saved. Horst Lange from Berlin, who had previous experience as a soldier, was not at all impressed by the amateurish training:

"Training with bazookas and other weapons ... A sorry sight: sergeants and non-commissioned officers are incapable of using or even understanding a machine gun or submachine gun," wrote 40-year-old Lange, who had suffered a head injury on the Eastern Front in 1941 and had been exempt from further service until now.

Few in the Volkssturm, however, were acquainted with machine guns. The German army's weapons shortage in 1945 meant that the militia force was at best supplied with old rifles that the Nazis had appropriated during the war in Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Italy and France, as well as in the Balkans. Kurt Bohg, a young Berliner, experienced first-hand the scarcity of resources



Young and old fought side by side in the Volkssturm. The oldest could even have passed themselves off as the grandparents of the youngest.

when he arrived at a school with 30-40 newly conscripted older men:

"A man in some kind of military uniform appeared to be the commanding officer of the group. 'Does anyone have a rifle?' he asked. It was a stupid question! Of course no one had a gun – it was illegal to have one! Then the officer strolled around handing out uniforms. He had postal uniforms, railroad uniforms and a few others of that sort at his disposal."

Bohg was also handed a random rifle – a Serbian carbine from 1870.

"At the moment we have no ammunition for it, but maybe we'll find some," the officer said dryly, but Bohg was then given a Panzerfaust, of which the Germans produced 1.2 million a month – which is why the anti-tank weapon was the most commonly used among the Volkssturm.

"What do I do with it?" Bohg asked.

"When a Soviet tank rolls up, just press this button. But make sure the tube is next to your body," was the brief instruction that made up Bohg's training.

For Johann Schlee and his ramshackle unit, the situation was not much better.

"We [received] the weapons right away, ancient long rifles from World War I, then Italian, Czech and so on. Some of the rifles were rusted, others were missing the safety catch or even the rear sight. Just unbelievable!" said the farmer who, carbine in hand, was sent to the front in the freezing cold of January.

Some of his Volkssturm group even had to set off wearing canvas desert boots because there were no more winter boots. All in all, a pitiful sight.

"Most of them had never been soldiers, had never held a weapon in their hands and were marked by age and illness," one of Schlee's comrades remarked after the war ►





The child soldiers were praised by the Nazi top brass for their bravery. Here Joseph Goebbels thanks a young boy for his efforts.

ended. Nevertheless, they now had to help stop the advancing Red Army east of Berlin.

Volkssturm was cannon fodder

The rapid advance of the Soviets in January meant that it wasn't long before the Nazis sent their new militia force into battle as the enemy approached the Oder. However, some of the Volkssturm members were even worse off than Bohg and Schlee. They were sent to the front with no weapons other than a spade. The idea was that the men would be issued with rifles when they arrived, but often there were no weapons available, especially at the beginning of March, when Hitler ordered that all Volkssturm weapons suitable for use in the field had to be immediately placed at the disposal of the Wehrmacht. Instead, the Volkssturm units had to try to collect weapons from fallen compatriots.

The lack of training and equipment meant that the Volkssturm was effectively powerless against the more combat-experienced and far better armed Ivans. One German Wehrmacht officer used the term "casserole" to describe the motley militia force because the Volkssturm consisted of old meat and green vegetables that would inevitably be roasted by the Soviets.

A German SS lieutenant on the Oder front dryly observed that *"these men were sacrificed by headquarters as cannon fodder"*, and in the Wartheland region of Poland, Gauleiter Arthur Greiser was also quick to admit that the Volkssturm battalions were *"simply overrun"*.

The Soviets regarded the Volkssturm as soldiers and called them *"totals"* because they were the product of total mobilisation.

Therefore, the Ivans showed no mercy to the militia force, but when the Hitler Youth boys suddenly appeared before them, the Soviets could not always bring themselves to kill the lads in cold blood. This was the experience of Captain Shota Sulkhaniashvili, who was surprised by an armed teen during a mine clearance operation on the Oder:

"He was wearing a long trench-coat and a cap. He fired a burst with his submachine gun. But then ... started to sob. He tried to shout, 'Hitler kaputt, Stalin gut!' I laughed. I hit him only once in the face. Poor boys, I felt sorry for them."

Many of the older men in the Volkssturm had no hope of ►

FACTS

Hitler ordered the head of the Volkssturm, Martin Bormann, to recruit

6 million

boys and men for the militia. There was no way Bormann could conjure up so many troops, and in the defence of Berlin, the Volkssturm had only

43,000

soldiers at its disposal.

We were issued with Volkssturm armbands and given rifles – five bullets per man. We were now soldiers and had to comply. ■ Friedrich Matthey, tramway employee.

stopping the tide of the enemy, as they rarely had the same faith in Nazism as the youths. As a result, the men were often quick to surrender when the Soviets advanced, or they took cover in the forests and prayed that the Ivans would not scour the woodlands too thoroughly. The forests were also often a better option than fleeing towards Berlin, as the field gendarmerie and SS groups were still executing deserters, whether they were German soldiers in full military uniform, a weak old man in zookeeper's clothes or a young lad in Hitler Youth attire.

Old men built barricades

While the deployed Volkssturm units were tasked with keeping the Soviets at bay in the regions east of Berlin, other members were busy building defences in the capital. But because Hitler was so keen to stop the enemy at the Oder, virtually all the excavators had been sent out of Berlin, so the construction of barricades had to be done by hand, shovel and wheelbarrow. Horst Lange, who had military experience from before his head injury, was not at all impressed by the construction and arsenal in the capital in February: *"Makeshift fortifications are*

being thrown up around Berlin, hastily and haphazardly. These defences are worth next to nothing ... Laughable makeshift barricades and tank traps scraped together by Volkssturm men using junk and the rubble of the bombed houses. Elderly men carrying rusty guns on strings, barrel-down. Still, enormously proud of their ridiculous peashooters!"

Hellmuth Reymann, who in March was given the dubious honour of overseeing Berlin's defences, was not enthusiastic either. The lieutenant general knew that a lot had to happen in record time if the capital were to become even a fraction of the fortress Hitler envisaged. In March, however, the sound of pickaxes and shovels began to fill Berlin in earnest as the construction of the city's defensive rings of armoured trenches and concrete fortresses progressed.

Outside the city, the Volkssturm dug trenches and pounded dragon's teeth – concrete anti-tank obstacles – into the ground, and in the streets of Berlin they blocked the streets with trams and old railway carriages, and filled the entrenchments with rubble from the ruins. But the Germans had few mines and almost no barbed wire at their disposal, and Reymann

The backbone of the Volkssturm was made up of young boys who had been brainwashed in the Hitler Youth for a decade.



knew that the hastily built barricades could not stop the flow of Soviet tanks and soldiers. To further strengthen the defence of Berlin, the Nazis once again lowered the bar on who could be deployed against the Soviets – 14 and 15-year-old boys were encouraged or forced to enlist. In Oranienburg, just north of Berlin, the local Hitler Youth commander even had the police bring in 13-year-old boys from the *Deutsche Jungvolks* (the junior branch of the Hitler Youth) so they too could defend the capital.

In the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg, 14-year-old Erich Schmidtke was called up as a flak helper. His mother was distraught, but had to tearfully accompany her little boy to the Hermann Göring barracks in the Reinickendorf district. There she gave him one last hug before he was dragged fearfully into the barracks with his suitcase. Soon, as a soldier, he would be manning an anti-aircraft gun. The last of the working men were also called to arms. Among them was Friedrich Matthey, a tramway worker, who was approached in his apartment by a Volkssturm leader waving a pistol threateningly in his hand:

"I had to report to the office immediately or I would see what would happen to me. I plucked up courage and went to the office where some of my colleagues had gathered ... We were issued with Volkssturm armbands and given rifles – five bullets per man ... We were now soldiers and had to comply."

While Lieutenant General Hellmuth Reymann was incredibly dissatisfied with his defence force, which – in addition to the last Wehrmacht troops – included grey-haired men and schoolboys, Goebbels, who as well as all his other posts was also Berlin's Gauleiter, was more optimistic, even though the enemy threat loomed large.

"Volkssturm battalions pass my window singing. In Berlin at least we are still organising our defence and I am firmly determined that, if it comes to the crunch here, I will face the enemy with a battle unique in the history of this war," Goebbels noted in his diary on 27th March.

Boys manned Panzerfaust

The influx of new young boys to join the capital's defence meant that several positions within and just outside the city were manned by children aged 14-15 as the Red Army approached Berlin during April. Just like the older men of the Volkssturm, the boys' primary task was to prevent Soviet tanks from entering the capital.

The advantage of arming Germany's boys with a Panzerfaust was that the children, with their small bodies, could move easily around Berlin's ruins. This was useful both when the boys had to hide and when they had to dash away through the rubble at breakneck speed after firing the anti-tank weapon. Some of them were so brainwashed after several years

NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



The Guardian

23rd April 1945

Berlin flouts its Gauleiter's orders

From our special correspondent.

Stockholm, 22nd April

Direct telephone and telegram communication with Berlin has been interrupted since dawn, but the telephone is functioning between Stockholm and Hamburg and Copenhagen, which have some sort of contact with Berlin.

They report tonight that the Russians have today occupied the Weissensee quarter, broken into Neukölln, approached the Tempelhof Airport and reached Lichterfeld, where there are large SS barracks.

Goebbels's orders about traffic discipline and, indeed, most orders are being flouted, and the roads westward are crammed with people struggling to escape. Also a great stream of wounded is being transported, nobody knows wither,

including a large proportion of boys and some women.

There appears to be a tacit understanding among the people that civilians must not participate in the fighting, despite impassioned appeals to them to do so. It is said that in some suburbs the defenders consist of boys aged 12 to 14 years of age who are the most desperate and most fanatical of all, and that these boy units make a horrible impression as they march to the front overweighed by anti-tank and other weapons.

One correspondent in what he said would probably be his last message "before Berlin is occupied" said the atmosphere has become extremely tense, with panic in some places. Reports were current that Goebbels had broken his promise of yesterday and escaped, but it was "impossible to judge whether this is true or has been circulated by the opponents of the regime".

in Hitler's youth movements that they would do anything to help the Führer win.

"Added to the confidence in battle of these warlike children came a rancorous frenzy and a boundless contempt of death, which we grown-ups could not muster. With the agility and speed of weasels, they climbed and struggled their way into impossible positions to knock out a Soviet tank with a Panzerfaust or to finish off one or several Red Army soldiers with a hand grenade. A number of Soviet tanks were put out of action by small boys during the battle of Berlin," an SS veteran later recounted

One of the youngsters who successfully stopped a tank was 15-year-old Harry Bahrmann, who was ►

There were even boys of 12 fighting against us. I saw them with my own eyes. ■ Anatoly Mereshko, Soviet captain.

lying in wait in a small hamlet outside Berlin. He described his triumph in the *Völkischer Beobachter*:

"I lie in the roadside ditch in the middle of the village. In the area before me, the street comes to an end to my right. I lie where the road makes a sharp bend. The ditch is not deep, but I duck down. I can see for about 50 metres down the street, then the corner of the adjacent house cuts off my view. I hear the tank coming and duck down even lower. He must not see me first. He shoots and [the shots] resound in my ear, but I think, 'He cannot see me and is shooting over me.' I want to let him come up very close."

"I'm almost lying completely on my stomach on the embankment, releasing the safety catch of the bazooka and pressing it against me. I try to decide how I will do it. The roar of the turret gun almost knocks me over. Then I see [the tank] and quickly duck my head away. I didn't think any more, except that it was almost directly upon me. I see it suddenly, although I keep my head low. It is no more than six metres away. I really wanted to shoot from a prone position, but I spring up halfway and discharge the weapon, and I cannot miss."

"There was immediately a dense cloud of smoke about the tank, from which a cascade of bright lights appeared as if someone were doing welding. The tank half turned, blocked the street, and burned out. I was completely dirty and wet from the culvert. I thought, 'Now you can really come out of the ditch.' From the entryway of a nearby house, someone ran out to me and said, 'You shot the tank.' 'Yes,' I said."

Hitler was thrilled by the iron will of boys like Harry Bahrmann. Another committed child soldier was 16-year-old Günther Nowak, who, before the Soviets reached Berlin, had been the youngest ever recipient of a Knight's Cross, for destroying nine Soviet tanks. The Führer personally thanked the head of the Hitler Youth, Artur Axmann, who had repeatedly sent his young fighters against the enemy.

"Without your boys, the battle could not be continued, not just here in Berlin, but in all of

Germany," Hitler solemnly declared to the man in charge in indoctrinating the youngsters.

For the Soviets, however, it was far from commendable that the enemy was sending young boys to war. Although the Red Army had recruited 16 and 17-year-olds, the Soviets in Berlin thought it crazy to be suddenly faced with boys who should be rolling hoops instead of throwing grenades. Lieutenant Vladimir Zhilkin was shocked when he and his reconnaissance unit reached the outskirts of Berlin on 21st April and saw figures emerging from a cellar:

"They didn't look like soldiers, and using our field glasses we realised that they were teenage boys. At the time we had no inkling of the existence of the Hitler Youth, let alone that they had been recruited by the Nazis to help defend the city. It was our first encounter with them. They were assembling in front of us, each of them armed with a bazooka. They were dangerous weapons for kids to be carrying. Fourteen-year-olds, maybe younger, and they were marching on us. Our infantry was at a loss – what should we do?"

Zhilkin quickly sought advice from his commander-in-chief, who simply delegated responsibility.

"It's up to you – you decide. Scare them – perhaps they will run away," was the reply.

"So we fired several shots above their heads. It had no effect at all. If anything they were approaching even faster, at a run. We fired into the ground in front of them. It had the same effect. And then they started firing at us. We unleashed a volley at point-blank range. Some were killed – others fled, into basements of surrounding houses. And that was how we beat off their so-called attack."

Soviet Captain Anatoly Mereshko was equally dismayed by his new opponents, who had never looked younger than on the streets of Berlin:

"There were even boys of 12 fighting against us. I saw them with my own eyes – and I saw the bodies of those we killed. We had to shoot them."

Little boys scared out of their wits

The Soviets were not the only ones who found it incredible that armed teenagers and older children had been deployed in the defence of the capital. Mothers, who in many cases had already lost their husbands, were naturally devastated, but other Berliners shook their heads in disbelief at the idea that little boys were now being sacrificed in a war that had already been lost.

"Volkssturm units are posted at the barricade, in uniforms hastily pieced together. You see very young boys, baby faces peeping out beneath oversized steel helmets; it's frightening to hear their high-pitched voices. They're 15 years old at the most, standing there looking so skinny ►

Due to the lack of uniforms, Volkssturm members could often only be recognised by their armbands.



Although the text said otherwise, the Volkssturm was not controlled by the Wehrmacht, but by the Nazi Party.



Barricades were built in Berlin by members of the Volkssturm. The materials for their construction were found in the ruins of the capital.



Relieved Volkssturm soldiers surrendered to the British. Older members, in particular, were unwilling to sacrifice their lives in the hopeless struggle.

and small in their billowing uniform tunics. Wasting these boys before they reach maturity obviously runs against some fundamental law of nature, against our instinct, against every drive to preserve the species. Like certain fish or insects that eat their own offspring. People aren't supposed to do that. The fact that this is exactly what we are doing is a sure sign of madness,"

wrote an anonymous Berlin woman in her diary on 23rd April 1945. Nor were many of the child soldiers as brave and courageous as the Nazis wanted to portray them. It was one thing to shoot a rifle at a youth camp, quite another to stand with a Panzerfaust or a grenade in your hand and know that the enemy was shooting to kill. The Berliner Dorothea von Schwanenflügel saw the troubled little boys in the streets. She couldn't resist approaching one of them, a "sad-looking young boy":

"I went over to him and found a mere child in a uniform many sizes too big for him, with an anti-tank grenade lying beside him. Tears were running down his face, and he was obviously very frightened of everyone. I very softly asked him what he was doing there. He lost his distrust and told me that he had been ordered to lie in wait here, and when a Soviet tank approached he was to run under it and explode the grenade.

"I asked how that would work, but he didn't know. In fact, this frail child didn't even look capable of carrying such a grenade. By now, he was sobbing and muttering

Hitler honoured young boys for their courage

The Führer awarded the Iron Cross to 20 boys for courageously helping German forces outside Berlin.

On 20th March 1945, in the garden near the Reich Chancellery bunker, Adolf Hitler posed for the last time in front of photographers and rolling TV cameras as he honoured 20 boys with an Iron Cross for distinguishing themselves in the fighting outside Berlin.

The youngest of the recipients was Albert Czech, aged just 12, who had driven wounded soldiers away from the front in his father's horse-drawn cart. Another proud recipient of the Iron Cross was 16-year-old Willi Hübner, who had transported ammunition to troops in a wheelbarrow while under fire from the enemy.

After the filming, during which Hitler shook hands and patted the boys on the cheeks, the 20 youngsters had the honour of having lunch with the Führer and Eva

Braun, sharing war stories. Before the children left Berlin, they were each granted a wish. Czech wished for and received an accordion, but the boy could not return to his hometown, which had been captured by the Red Army. Instead, the boy was sent to Sudetenland, where he was shot in the lung while fighting the enemy.

Czech survived, but had to spend two years in captivity before returning to Germany in 1947. There he learned that his father had been killed by the Soviets while serving in the Volkssturm.

Children were enrolled as Hitler's last soldiers. The boys were some of the few who were still blinded by Nazi propaganda.



something, probably calling for his mother in despair, and there was nothing I could do to help him. He was a picture of distress, created by our inhuman government. If I encouraged him to run away, he would be caught and hung by the SS, and if I gave him refuge in my home, everyone in the house would be shot by the SS. So, all we could do was to give him something to eat and drink from our rations. When I looked for him early next morning he was gone and so was the grenade. Hopefully, his mother found him and would keep him in hiding during those last days of a lost war."

The field court martials were the reason why many in the Volkssturm were reluctant to flee. After the first battles against the Soviets, one boy, aged just 13, who had been pressured to enlist in Oranienburg, found that it was extremely dangerous to retreat. When the surviving boys wanted to go home, they encountered a group of SS who demanded that

the 13-year-olds continue fighting with them:

"My platoon commander, who refused, was hung from the

nearest tree ... but he was already 15. Then the remains of our Hitler Youth unit, eight of us – and we had been 120 – went along."

Sixteen-year-old Harry Schweizer also succumbed to the Nazi threats. The teenager, who had been assigned a post in the large Zoo flak tower at Tiergarten, briefly visited his parents as the Soviets approached the Lichtenberg district in eastern Berlin. But Schweizer didn't dare go into hiding, even though the opportunity presented itself.

"The people in the block told me the war was lost and that I should put on civilian clothes and stay with my parents but I had already seen several soldiers hanging from lampposts on the Unter den Linden with placards round their necks on which was written 'I was too much of a coward to defend my country'. Fear of being arrested by the SS and of dying in that way was greater than that of the front line,"

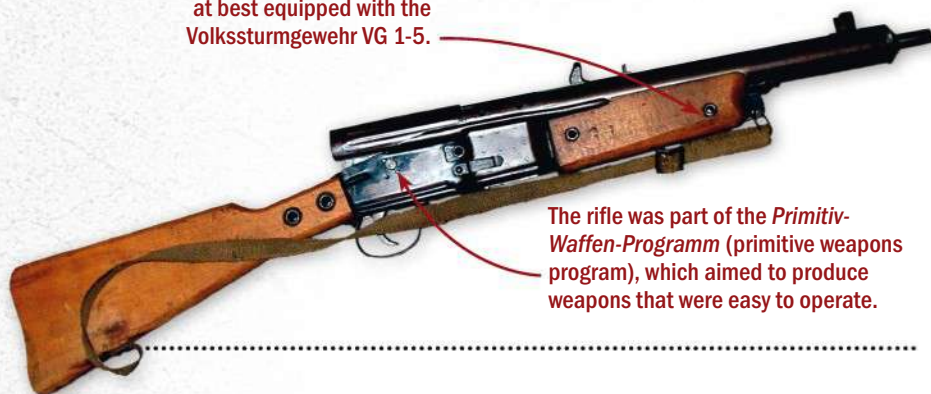
Schweizer recounted years later.

Volkssturm gave up

Although there was a danger of being executed by the SS, in the last week of the



The militiamen of the Volkssturm were at best equipped with the Volkssturmgewehr VG 1-5.



The rifle was part of the *Primitiv-Waffen-Programm* (primitive weapons program), which aimed to produce weapons that were easy to operate.

war it was a risk that both boys and men in the Volkssturm chose to take. The chaotic conditions in Berlin, which grew with the daily advance of the Red Army, meant that a man in uniform – however unsoldier-like he looked – and with weapon in hand was more likely to die from a Soviet bullet than an SS one. As the Volkssturm's entrenchments in the capital were often too weak to resist the enemy, remaining behind the defences for any length of time meant certain death. A major commanding a mixed battalion in western Berlin learned how quickly it got too much for the Volkssturm:

"The battalion was composed of construction and Volkssturm troops, none of whom had had combat experience. They were armed with captured rifles and a few machine guns, and had only a limited supply of ammunition ... On the evening of the first day of battle, all the Volkssturm troops deserted."

Casualties were counted in thousands

When serious fighting began, many in the Volkssturm made sure to get as far from the front as possible. This was the tactic used by 14-year-old Erich Neumann and his uncle when the teenager was suddenly forced into a makeshift Volkssturm unit while riding his bicycle through the Charlottenburg neighbourhood to find a doctor for his sick mother. He was handed a rifle and sent to the western part of the city to fight. Fortunately, that's where he met his uncle:

"Uncle did not think much of heroism. The so-called battle consisted of a constant search for cover in stairwells and ruins Uncle Hermann thought only about survival, for us both. We left Spandau without a fight and marched west, as we thought the Russians were approaching from the east. Many others joined us and we quickly became a large group."

Tramway worker Friedrich Matthey had no intention of sacrificing his life for the Nazis' conceited belief that the battle could still be turned. He had been sent without any training to defend a railroad bridge in south-west Berlin. But Hitler could forget

about any loyalty from Matthey, who was far better armed than most in the Volkssturm.

"At nightfall I threw my rifle, ammunition, a Panzerfaust and two hand grenades down the railway embankment and disappeared back to my flat to the air-raid shelter, where I waited things out. That same night, the Red Army entered Zehlendorf," said Matthey, who probably saved his life that way.

Fourteen-year-old Erich Schmidtke, who had been dropped off by his mother at the Hermann Göring barracks, also chose escape over combat. After three days in the barracks, he and a group of his peers were ordered to join a division that was to assemble at the Reichssportfeld, next to the Olympic Stadium. But on the way there, he remembered what his father had told him during his leave from the Eastern Front. He had said that his son was now responsible for the family, so Erich Schmidtke decided to desert and hide in the ruins of the capital until the fighting in Berlin ended.

Another way to escape the battle alive was to surrender. And in the last days of April, many Volkssturm members eagerly waved makeshift white flags as Soviet forces approached the barricades. Among them was Robert Milter, who stopped shooting and allowed himself to be captured in the south of Berlin. Many of his comrades had been wounded or had fallen. Others had fled the battlefield. None of Milter's fellow Volkssturm men wanted to fight any more – everyone thought the war was lost.

Unlike the soldiers in the Wehrmacht and the SS troops, Milter and other men of the Volkssturm dared to be captured by the Red Army. According to Soviet reports, there was a very clear reason for this:

"Interrogation of captured Volkssturm members revealed an interesting fact. When they were asked why there are no regular soldiers and officers among them, they said that they were afraid of their responsibility for what they had done in Russia. They will therefore surrender to the Americans, while the Volkssturm can surrender to the Bolsheviks because they are guilty of nothing," a representative of the Soviet security service NKVD, Ivan Serov, reported back to his bosses in the capital Moscow.

Unfortunately, many boys and men of the Volkssturm never managed to escape or surrender before being hit by Soviet gunfire. No one knows the exact number of casualties, but with some 43,000 men – including at least 5,000 members of the Hitler Youth – fighting while wearing the Volkssturm's armband in Berlin and the surrounding area alone, the death toll must undoubtedly have run into the thousands. And their efforts made little difference militarily – they merely fell in Hitler's futile attempt to defend a city that could not be saved. ■

FACTS

The weapons shortage was severe in the Volkssturm. In January 1945, the force had only

40,500

rifles and

2,900

machine guns available.

Many of the weapons were obsolete.

*A 13-year-old boy
captured by the Allies,
who encountered
German soldiers as
young as 12.*



“We couldn't leave... deserters were shot”

By Torsten Weper

Hans Müncheberg was 15 years old when his headmaster dispatched him to the SS as the Red Army advanced into Germany. Together with his classmates, he was ordered to halt the Soviet encirclement of Berlin in April 1945. His fight lasted until 9th May.

You were 15 years old when you were sent to fight. But your path to war began five years earlier. How did you end up in Napola [National Political Institutes of Education], one of the elite Nazi boarding schools?

if you were Slavic or Nordic. I was blonde, but I don't think I had the right head shape, so I was categorised as 'Nordic 2'.

But despite this, the assessment went well?

I grew up in a home riven by conflict. My parents constantly argued and one day, when I was nine, they almost came to blows. With a scream, I threw myself between them – and then had a nervous breakdown. The doctors told my parents to make up – otherwise I had to leave home or I would die. My father was a WWI veteran and a Party member, so when the Napola recruiter came to my school, I was selected for a week-long trial.

Thirty pupils were admitted and I learnt that I was number 13. The school year began on 9th April – the day of the occupation of Denmark and Norway. The headmaster, Otto Calliebe, gave us a speech about “securing the Nordic region” and that this was therefore a historic day.

How was life at school?

You were always under surveillance. We slept in a dormitory with 100 beds, and in the centre was a small cubicle where the night watchman sat. We did our homework in our room – 12 boys; in the class there were 30 pupils. Only in the toilet were we alone. I longed to go home.

How did the week go?

We had tests in all school subjects. There were sports exercises and ideological tests, and there was a test of courage where you had to climb a rope from tree to tree. They also measured your skull so they could tell

How did you experience the war as a pupil at a secluded boarding school?

We had big maps on which the course of the front was drawn. In the beginning, everything went well. After Stalingrad, the concept of ‘sustained resistance’ emerged – the Wehrmacht withdrawing slowly to wear down the enemy. There were two



HANS MÜNCHEBERG (born 1929)

Hans Müncheberg took part in the Battle of Berlin in 1945. In the years that followed, he suffered persecution because of his past as a pupil at an elite Nazi school, but he managed to become a teacher and later joined East German radio as a playwright.

Müncheberg's Wehrpass, which stated that he was too small and had been rejected as a conscript.



older pupils at the school who were related to the officers behind the attempted assassination of Hitler in July 1944; both were handed over to the Gestapo. Calliebe made it clear that there was no entry to the Führer's enemies at his school.

In September 1944, we were ordered to break off our holiday. We were to go to the forests east of the Oder River to prepare a new battle line. We dug tank positions for two weeks – but in the end, of course, it was no use. In the evenings, we watched weekly newsreels with the new V-1 rockets, and we boys thought, "The Russians have millions of soldiers, but we have the retaliatory weapons. After the V-1, V-2s and V-3s will probably come."

The wunderwaffe (wonder weapons) were a long time coming. In the final months of the war, the Nazis conscripted all able-bodied men into the Volkssturm – a home defence force of Germany's last reserves. By law, all men between 16 and 60 had to join the Volkssturm, while 14- to 16-year-old boys could volunteer if their parents gave them permission. Naturally, everyone in my class volunteered – not a single parent said no. Not even my mother. Who dared to rob the Führer of a soldier?

Then the military training began. We practised at the shooting range, firing the MG-44. I wrote home to my mother: "I fired the best machine gun in the world!" We learnt trench warfare, house-to-house fighting, positional warfare and how to use a Panzerfaust. On 4th April 1945, we had to conscript. My Wehrpass states that I was 160 cm tall, weighed 45 kg – and was unfit and could only be recalled on 1st July 1945. I was too thin.

But you didn't get off that easily...

No, on the night of 15th April came the air raid on Potsdam, which also destroyed large parts of our Napola. Afterwards, we counted 30 craters in the ground. We were in the basement when the planes came. The bombs tore the steel doors out of their frames, but as soon as the alarm ended, we were told to put on our helmets and help in the burning city. A woman's arm was trapped under a fallen steel girder. She couldn't get free. I was told to tie her arm up tightly so it could be sawed off. I will never forget that sound.

Originally our school was ordered to be evacuated to North Germany, but Calliebe cancelled the order. We were going to the SS. First, however, he let a few pupils pack his belongings on a lorry and explained: "The Führer has given me another task." Then he drove westwards. My class was told to cycle to Spandau, where there was an



Napola schools were elite Nazi schools for specially selected boys destined to occupy the most important posts in the Third Reich.

abandoned Napola. It was like an adventure. We had no idea where we were going. We only found out when the head of the Napola schools, August Heissmeyer, appeared and gave us the honourable task of preventing the Bolshevik encirclement of the Reich capital.

The Napola school was empty, so we moved into the dormitory. When the front came closer, we slept in the basement. Next door, my friend Theo told me that the SS were holding a parade – I didn't see it myself. The deserters were judged and shot outside. During the day we were attached to an SS company. We were divided in two – those who'd been accepted during conscription were Kampfgruppe 1, the rest of us were Kampfgruppe 2. It didn't matter. First Kampfgruppe 1 went into the trenches, then Kampfgruppe 2 relieved them.

Who was in charge of the group?

It had an SS-Scharführer (sergeant). We were incorporated into a company of convalescent SS soldiers. We didn't feel that they took us seriously – several times they sent us to the front so as not to come under fire themselves.

How did you get something to eat?

In the Napola's kitchen, food was cooked every day. At first hot dishes, but eventually only sandwiches. We didn't starve because the school had a large supply. On the Führer's birthday, 20th April, August Heissmeyer came to visit us again. His driver told us that afterwards he ►

flew down to his wife in the Alpine strongholds. He left us behind.

When was the first encounter with the enemy?

We first faced the enemy on 25th or 26th April 1945. Inside Spandau's Südpark gardens, we were tasked with halting the Red Army's advance. Our trenches were destroyed by the shelling from the 'Stalin's Organs', and in the middle of it all our PE teacher, Teddy Möller, turned up. He was the only teacher who looked after us. The others donned civilian clothes and disappeared. During the next attack, Teddy had one of his legs ripped off at the thigh.

My friend Theo tried to help him, but Teddy said it was no use. There was no way to stop bleeding that bad. We tried to carry him to safety, but he told us to get out of there.

But escape was impossible – you had to stay in Spandau and fight on.

Here we lay as the slow Soviet biplanes flew close overhead. The experienced SS men knew what was coming: "Take cover! It's about to start!" The planes looked for German positions, and then came the Katyusha rockets. We were lying on the edge of a forest, while metal and wood splinters flew around us. This is where the first of my comrades died.

Later, I was lying next to my classmates Bertram and Egon when a light Soviet armoured car approached. Egon jumped up and fired his Panzerfaust. He missed, but it backed away. Shortly afterwards we heard heavy chains, and then we knew that a T-34 was coming.

We had to retreat. I told Bertram that we had to leave. He was just lying there as if he was asleep,

Müncheberg attended the school for five years, from 9th April 1940 until the fall of Berlin five years later.



and then I realised his face was gone. He was lying there dead. After the war I enquired in the archives and was told that he was in a cemetery. At least he had a grave after his death.

The Red Army pressed on and you were pushed back.

Our group got separated. I found my way to the Berlin radio station with a few others. The Red Army knew it was a valuable building and did not fire on it. In the basement below was a kitchen that served hot meals. There I heard the untruthful announcement of the "heroic death of the Führer".

What did you do at the radio station?

We were sent on patrol. From the radio station, a subway tunnel led down to a residential area that was still in German hands. We had to prevent the Red Army from entering. Soviet snipers were all around, but there was no direct combat. But if we were spotted, we risked being shot.

Was the radio station in Berlin still broadcasting?

Yes, it even had a propaganda arm that interviewed us. "What did you boys experience in Spandau and how did you get here?" the journalist asked. And the programme was broadcast. It may have been heard by our Latin teacher Knaupe – he certainly turned up at the radio station. "I just wanted to check on you," he said. "If any of you need help, I live in Witzleben. You are welcome."

He urged you to escape. Why didn't you take him up on his offer?

We were together in a company. We couldn't leave our post, or we would have committed desertion – and deserters were shot.

By this time, the city was surrounded by the Red Army. What was the atmosphere like at the radio station?

Rumours had spread that Berlin would surrender. The radio station possessed several outbuildings with courtyards between them. Hundreds of soldiers and civilians gathered here. They had heard that some would try to break out of the city to avoid Soviet captivity.

After dark on 1st May, a column moved westwards down Heerstraße. The Charlotten



Hans Müncheberg

Bridge was still intact and that was the crossing. North of the bridge was a peninsula already controlled by the Red Army, and they could fire on the bridge – but they only had machine guns.

The attempted breakout lasted a week, during which the column tried in vain to reach the British lines. How did the war end for you?

On 9th May we reached the village of Pāwesin, about 30 km from Berlin. A farm dog barked and a woman came out. I explained about my group looking for food and a place to sleep.

"It won't work," said the farmer's wife. "The Russians have been here. They told me that Germany has surrendered." I went back and explained the situation to the others.

"It can't be true that Germany has surrendered!" I said. "The truth sometimes takes more courage than the lie," replied a peg-legged colonel.

That's when I realised it was all over and I cried my eyes out. I was exhausted and fell asleep on the spot. When I finally woke up, I was alone.

I walked back to the farm and the dog broke free from its chain. It knocked me over and I fainted. When I came to, I heard loud Russian voices. I was lying on the farm's sofa, completely defenceless. The Russians came in with machine guns, but the peasant's wife stood between them. She had thrown my SS camouflage uniform, pistol and hand grenade into the manure pit.

"No soldier," she said.

They looked at my baby face. I was afraid they were going to kill me, but they just said:

"Hitler kaput, fascism kaput. You're going home to your mum!" ■

Hans Müncheberg's class in 1943. Müncheberg lies in front of his best friend, Theo. Just two years later, they donned SS uniforms and fought on the outskirts of Berlin. Twelve of the class of 30 boys died in the Battle of Berlin.



”
Stand fast, fight fanatically.
We are not surrendering.

Martin Bormann, Hitler's personal secretary.

BERLIN'S FINAL DAYS

Battle of Berlin 1945



Street by street and house by house, the Red Army fought its way through Berlin, where fanatical SS soldiers would rather die than surrender.

Berlin's final days

Around 1.5 million Soviets stood poised to surround Berlin and take the city street by street. Berlin's last defences numbered around 100,000 men, only half of whom were regular soldiers. Meanwhile, Berliners huddled in the ruins, clinging to the hope of mercy from the enemy. But in Berlin, there would be no mercy.

By Troels Ussing

The buzz ran through the long queue in front of the Karstadt department store on Hermannplatz in the Berlin district of Neukölln on the morning of Saturday 21st April. The women in the queue, some of them holding small children, were talking about yesterday's explosions in the outskirts of the capital to the north-east, where Soviet shells had fallen. Everyone knew that soon the Red Army's fire would strike their neighbourhood and the rest of Berlin. But getting a morsel of bread or a bucket of water from the water pump was still necessary for survival. For Berliners, taking a place in the hour-long queues had become an unavoidable chore, no matter how close the enemy might be.

At 11.30, a terrifying howl interrupted the women's voices in Hermannplatz. The howl grew to a crescendo and suddenly the crowd dispersed. Everyone fled in all directions as they tried to exit the square. But too late. Seconds later, artillery shells – the first to strike Berlin itself – exploded all over Hermannplatz. The wooden boards nailed to Karstadt's shop windows were

smeared with blood and flesh. Body parts rained down on the square, where the wounded screamed in agony.

Soon the shells were falling on other Berlin neighbourhoods, too. Vehicles somersaulted. Flames shot up through rooftops. Brick walls collapsed. The Brandenburg Gate was hit, the Unter den Linden boulevard was ploughed up and the Royal Palace caught fire. The front had reached Berlin's streets and famous buildings. The fall of the capital was imminent.

Soviets planned to encircle Berlin

The sound of artillery on 21st April was music to the ears of Marshals Zhukov and Konev, who had waited impatiently to hear the howl of the Stalin's organs over Berlin. In early April, Stalin had urgently summoned the pair to the Kremlin to plan the final capture of Berlin. The Soviet leader, having himself ordered a pause for the troops at the Oder River, had become afraid that the Americans would reach the German capital before him.

"The German front in the west has collapsed completely and, apparently, the Hitlerites do not want to take measures to stop the advance of Allied troops. At the same time they are strengthening their groups on all the most important sectors against us," Stalin had confessed to Zhukov on 30th March. By 1st April, he summoned Zhukov and Konev to him.

"Well, then," the Soviet leader said. *"Who is going to take Berlin: are we or are the Allies?"*

"It is we who shall take Berlin, and we will take it before the Allies," Konev assured the Soviet dictator.

To carry out the operation, the army commanders had 1.5 million soldiers at their disposal. The plan was

Snipers were one of the biggest dangers in Berlin and their high positions meant tank guns could rarely be fired on them. Instead, the Soviets used other weapons, including anti-aircraft guns.



for Zhukov and Konev to send their troops north and south of the city respectively, meeting as soon as possible to the west of Berlin. With such an encirclement, the Americans would not be able to spoil the Soviet triumph in Hitler's capital. As the pincer slowly closed in the west, Zhukov was to attack the city from the north and east with his 1st Belorussian Front, while Konev's troops in the 1st Ukrainian Front fought their way towards the heart of Berlin from the south.

While Zhukov and Konev brimmed with confidence as Soviet shells poured into Berlin on 21st April, the city's commander, Major General Hellmuth Reymann, was worried. The Red Army had swatted aside the defences outside Berlin, and in the capital itself, Reymann had fewer than 100,000 men, almost half of whom were Volkssturm troops.

After the war, Reymann wondered *"what in God's name I was supposed to do"*, and Franz Halder – former chief of staff of the army high command – also wrote after the war that Reymann and his troops stood no chance against the enemy.

"No cohesive, overall plan for the defence of Berlin was ever actually prepared. All that existed was the stubborn determination of Hitler to defend the capital of the Reich. Circumstances were such that he gave no thought to defending the city until it was much too late for any kind of advance planning. Thus the city's defence was characterised only by a mass of improvisation," said Halder, who had been sacked from his post as chief of staff in the autumn of 1942.

Hitler, of course, thought otherwise, and Reymann was quickly punished when he was sacked on 22nd April, just as Zhukov's tank companies began to roll into Berlin's outer districts. General Helmuth Weidling took his place. And if Weidling had any doubts, expectations were high. Hitler's faithful squire Goebbels sent an unmistakable call to the defenders of Berlin:

"Men of Berlin, soldiers of the Wehrmacht and fighters of the Volkssturm! In our hand lies the fate of the Reich capital. We have in our city the necessary weapons, and we also have the courage to use and deploy these weapons. We are fighting in the ruins of our city, which we will one day rebuild as beautiful as it was. Berlin will not be given up to the Bolsheviks."

Shelters were crammed

As the first Soviet tank brigades rolled into Berlin's northern and eastern districts, the relentless artillery barrage against the capital itself continued. It followed no particular pattern, but each time it was *"full of death"*, as one Berliner wrote.

The mortars and the howling of the Katyusha rockets were the signal for Berlin's remaining inhabitants to drop everything and take cover in the



"Berlin will remain German" was a slogan Soviet soldiers saw all over the city's streets. The words were a harbinger of the fierce fighting to come.

city's anti-aircraft bunkers and shelters. In addition to Berlin's three giant flak towers, which could house up to 15,000 people on their lower floors, the Anhalter Bahnhof bunker just south of Potsdamer Platz was one of the largest air raid shelters in the capital.

The five-storey bunker was built of reinforced concrete with walls up to 4.5 metres thick, with three storeys above ground, and two floors below. The bunker's great advantage was that it was connected to the U-bahn underground railway, so people could walk for kilometres through the network's tunnels to reach it when the trains stopped running.

Among the 12,000 or so people who headed for the Anhalter Bahnhof bunker during the first days of the shelling were Elfriede and Erich Wassermann. Erich had lost one leg on the Eastern Front in 1943 and had to hobble along on crutches with one bag on his back and another strapped to his stomach. Elfriede lugged two suitcases containing their most important possessions.

By the time the couple reached the bunker, it was already packed with people, but they luckily found a spot on a landing next to a young woman holding a three-month-old baby.

Under the light of a dim bulb, a nightmare unfolded. People could barely move in the densely packed bunker and had to urinate and defecate among the crowd, while cries of agony rang out day and night from the floor above, reserved for the wounded.

For Elfriede, however, the worst thing was the constant wailing of babies. The mothers' supply of milk slowly ran out, and eventually the cries subsided. She reported seeing *"three small babies being carried down from the floor above, all of them dead from lack of food"*, noting that the young woman next to her was no longer holding her baby. Instead, the baby was lying on the cold floor. Dead.

Her mother sat pale and drowsy with a completely blank expression on her face. Elfriede was in the ►

STRENGTH RATIO

The Battle of Berlin clearly demonstrated Germany's inferiority by the relative sizes of each side's forces:

1.5 million

soldiers were at the Red Army's disposal, while the Germans could only muster fewer than

100,000

men and child soldiers.



Berlin's defences comprised hastily constructed barricades from which poorly equipped soldiers were tasked with sending the enemy on the run.

same exhausted and apathetic state. She found herself unable to feel any compassion.

"I simply saw that the child was dead without being upset in any way," she recalled after the war.

Civilians took shelter in basements

As there was not always the space or time to take cover in the capital's large, solid shelters, most Berliners hid in the basements of their apartment blocks. This allowed them to spend the quiet hours of the day in their flats, although this could be a mixed blessing. Often the dwellings were freezing cold because the windows had all been smashed and the electricity was out. Living a normal life was impossible.

"We are forced to think of personal hygiene as a luxury and of hot meals as abstract concepts. We are living like ghosts in a vast field of ruins," Berliner Helga Schneider wrote in her diary. *"A city where nothing works apart from the telephones that sometimes ring, glumly and pointlessly, beneath piles of fallen masonry."*

A woman in her early 30s, who later published her diaries from war-torn Berlin under the name Anonyma, also experienced the bleak conditions as

she waited in a penthouse apartment for the Red Army to reach her neighbourhood:

"The gas is running on a tiny, dying flicker. The potatoes have been cooking for hours. The most miserable potatoes in the country, good only for distilling into liquor, they turn to mush and taste like cardboard. I swallowed one half-raw ... Wind is blowing through the broken panes, rattling the blackout blinds. No one pulls them down any more – what's the point?"

Like many other Berliners, Anonyma got used to moving down to the basement of the building when the Soviet shells began to fall. With her notebook in hand, she trod carefully down the steps, often in the evening gloom. All the way, she heard and felt the shattering of glass under her feet until she reached the room where the rest of the building's occupants could be found:

"Finally we're in our shelter, behind an iron door that weighs a hundred pounds, with rubber seals around the edges and two levers to lock it shut. The official term is air-raid shelter. We call it cave, underworld, catacomb of fear, mass grave."

In the crowded cellar, people sat on various chairs they had dragged down from their flats, with a ►

Defensive rings would block the enemy on Berlin's doorstep



Under the code name Operation Clausewitz, the Nazis drew up a detailed defence plan for Berlin.

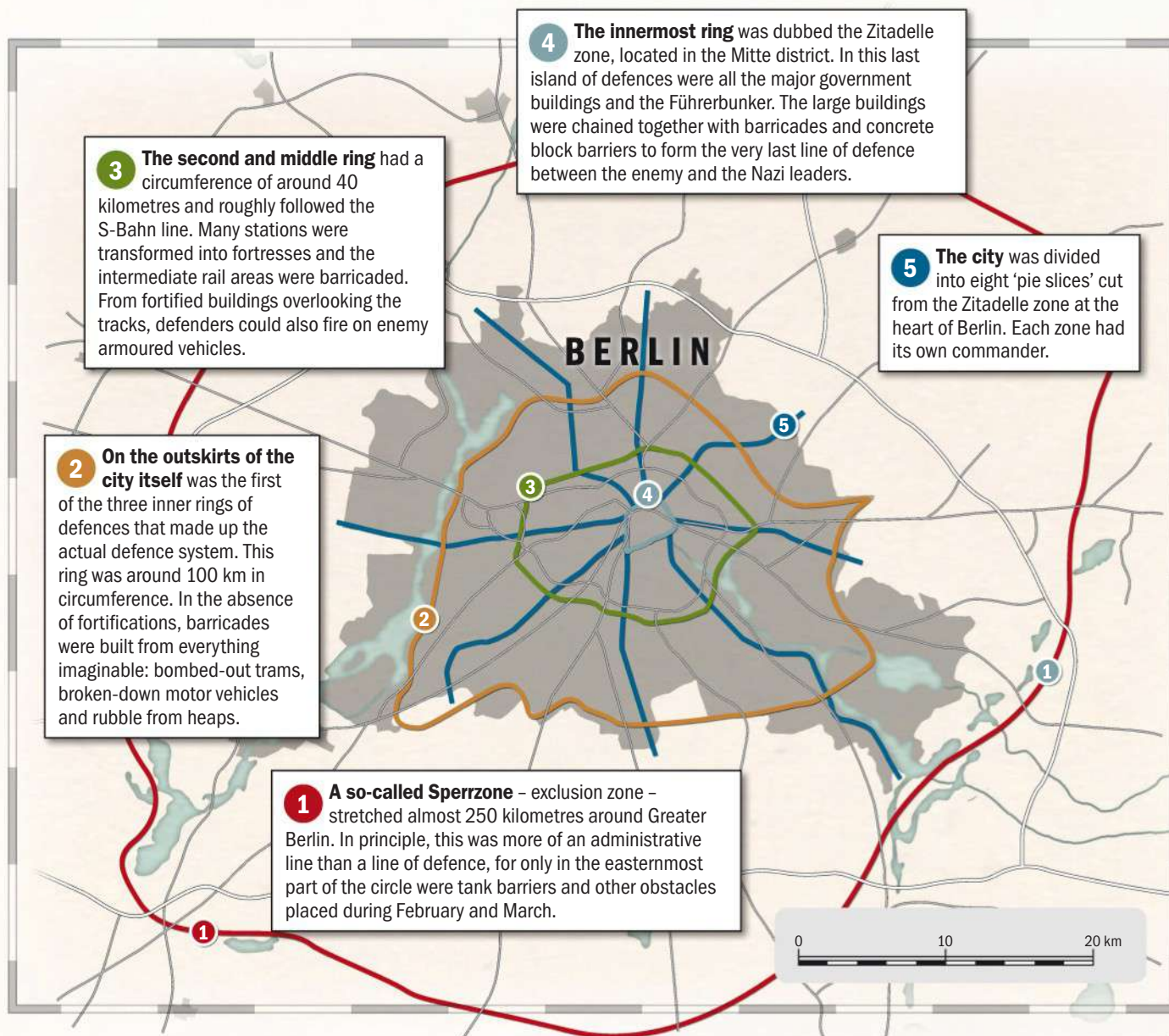
"The Reich capital will be defended to the last man and to the last bullet," read the document that set out the guidelines and also described how a series of concentric rings of defences, with armoured trenches and concrete fortifications, would be built to prevent the enemy from penetrating the capital itself.

The defence system could have provided a formidable barrier if the Germans had had time to complete its construction. But work only

began in earnest in March 1945 – partly because of Hitler's unwillingness to face up to reality. By the time construction finally got underway, the shortage of both manpower and building materials was so acute that workers were left in a race against time to construct a proper defence. As a result, only the innermost rings were of reasonable quality – at least when it came to the entrenchments themselves. In addition, the defence force consisted of untrained and poorly armed troops – not least from the Volkssturm – and Operation Clausewitz never had the effect the Nazis hoped for.



Overturned trams aimed to prevent Soviet tanks from rumbling forward.





The Guardian

London, 23rd April 1945

Refugees streaming westwards

Nearly twenty more suburbs fell to the Red Army yesterday, the second day of fighting in the streets of Greater Berlin.

One of the districts officially reported from Moscow as having been captured is five miles from the heart of the German capital, but according to the enemy's reports, fighting is going on near Stettiner Station, only a mile from Unter den Linden.

The captured suburbs lie in an arc round the central area of Berlin from north-north-west to south-east. According to unofficial reports, the railway which runs round the centre has already been crossed.

With the battle now reaching to the very streets of the city, Goebbels, Gauleiter of Berlin, has issued a despairing appeal for a last stand, declaring that he and his family are still in the capital

and threatening anyone whose house displays a white flag.

His words could have brought scant comfort to the citizens, for Russian shells – some of them, incidentally, fired by gunners from Leningrad, which suffered so long from German artillery – are now falling on the city without pause. A flood of refugees is reported to be streaming westward out of the city in spite of Goebbels's orders that the roads should be kept clear.

North and south of Berlin the Russian break-through and the latest American advances have made a junction of the east and west fronts a question almost of hours.

Liaison officers of both sides have gone to the front line ready for the link, but news of it will be withheld until it has been firmly established. There will then probably be a joint announcement by the British, American and Soviet Governments.

blanket or duvet over them, because they knew that the hours underground were often long. Breathing the dank basement air, the group – which included a pharmacist's widow and a young refugee from East Prussia – would doze or chat about anything and everything as the walls shook around them. One night, the conversation centred on the imminent arrival of the 'Ivans'. Most people in the cellar thought that German propaganda was probably exaggerating wildly when it wrote about the Red Army's atrocities east of Berlin.

"But then the refugee from East Prussia, who otherwise never says a word, starts yelling in her dialect. Broken sentences – she can't find the right words. She flails her arms and screams, 'You'll find

out all right,' and then goes silent once again. As does the entire basement," Anonyma wrote.

Soviets stormed the streets

On Monday 23rd April, the first Soviet forces stormed into Berlin from the city's outlying districts. The day before, Zhukov had complained to his army commanders that even though Berlin's defences were weak, his troops were advancing far too slowly. The marshal therefore demanded that his troops should now advance 24 hours a day, and the Ivans obediently followed Zhukov's orders.

"Fighting raged continuously around the clock. The artillery roared and thundered. The mortars barked and machine guns fired constantly. The whole city was in flames. Dense foul smoke curled over the roofs and hung heavily over the streets. It seeped into houses and basements – there was no air to breathe. Yet on we ran, across streets and yards, throwing our grenades into the empty eye-sockets of the windows," recounted private Vladimir Abyzov.

But even though the Red Army was numerically and materially superior, the Germans held their own. The remaining Wehrmacht soldiers, Volkssturm units and SS soldiers hid everywhere in the capital. The Soviets had to fight hard for every metre.

"There was shooting from every window, from every basement – and the roar of artillery fire all around us. On the streets we faced barricades, falling masonry, bazooka fire and the ever-present threat of snipers," said machine-gunner Matthew Gershman. His words were echoed by Lieutenant Vasily Ustyugov: *"The combat situation was always changing and the enemy was all around us, with machine-gun units, snipers and bazooka carriers."*

The many Soviet tanks also rolled on to the streets of Berlin, but according to Captain Anatoly Mereshko, the Red Army had to change tactics because it came under heavy fire from the city's tall buildings:

"Moving such a large number of tanks into the city meant high casualties among their crews. The roads were strewn with rubble, and the tanks lost their main advantage – their manoeuvrability. They formed long lines on one, two or three parallel streets, and slowly advanced down them. They were an easy target ... fired at from the first, second and third floors of buildings – and even from the cellars."

"We were forced to change our plans. Firstly, tanks were not to move without infantry support. Secondly ... our tanks were instructed to work together in groups of four or five. The first tank usually opened fire at cellars and first floors; the tank after it covered the second floor and higher up. There were three-, four-, even five-storey houses in the centre of Berlin. With the upper floors, the tank on the right shot at the left-hand

The whole city was in flames. Dense foul smoke curled over the roofs and hung heavily over the streets. ■ Vladimir Abyzov, Soviet private soldier.

side of the street, the tank on the left did the same on the right. This model of cooperation and coordination within a tank group allowed us to locate weapon emplacements in time – especially if enemy soldiers were armed with bazookas – and destroy them in the cellars, the lower floors or attics. Then our losses declined dramatically.”

When Red Army infantrymen advanced through the streets, their lives were constantly at risk. The tactic was to storm the buildings with small assault groups moving from room to room, floor to floor. Everywhere they risked a German lying in wait, but that was the nature of urban warfare, as Stalingrad veteran General Vasily Chuikov stressed when instructing his soldiers in the assault groups.

“Throw your grenade and follow up. You need speed, a sense of direction, great initiative and stamina because the unexpected will certainly happen. You will find yourself in a labyrinth of rooms and corridors all full of danger. Too bad,” said Chuikov.

However, the Soviets' fast pace also proved costly for German civilians, who were often in the same buildings: *“We didn't have time to distinguish who*

was who. Sometimes we just threw grenades into the cellars and passed on,” admitted one Soviet officer after the war.

The cost in human lives was sky-high, even for the Soviets themselves. Even if a floor was captured, the Ivans could not consider themselves safe, because German soldiers often attacked them from behind once they had entered a building. Vladimir Abyzov experienced this again and again:

“There were no clear front lines ... If we were on the first floor of a house, that was our front line. Theoretically, the ground floor would be our rear position. But within five or ten minutes all would be confusion again. The Germans would appear on the ground floor; the second floor would be engulfed by a sea of fire. The infantry manual is not much use in such conditions.”


Berliners uncovered human remains

As the Red Army advanced street by street in the capital's northern, eastern and southern districts, the inhabitants of central Berlin tried to survive the war raging around them. They continued to queue at the creaking, rusty water pumps and hunt for bacon ►

6,500 tanks were deployed in the Battle of Berlin. During 1944-45, Soviet tanks had been reinforced with stronger frontal armour, partly to prepare for fighting in the streets of the city.







From the north, east and south, Soviet forces surged into Berlin in an irresistible wave. After heavy artillery bombardment, the Storm troops attacked.

and bread in the shops, even though the shelves were now largely empty. Death was a constant companion everywhere on the streets, as the pharmacist's widow testified after a visit to the butcher's.

"She [the widow] just stormed in, all keyed up. A shell hit outside Hefter's meat market, right in the middle of the line. Three dead and ten wounded, but they're already lining up again. The widow demonstrated how people were using their sleeves to wipe the blood off their meat coupons," Anonyma wrote in her diary on the same day that death also reached her own neighbourhood:

"A little before noon there was a burial on our street ... A 17-year-old girl: grenade, shrapnel, leg amputated, bled to death. Her parents buried her in their garden behind some currant bushes. They used their old broom closet as a coffin."

Across the city, civilians were blown to smithereens, leaving their relatives or neighbours to find and place the body parts in random boxes buried in the city's small backyards. One woman from the Adlershof district of south-east Berlin reported that after an explosion, her neighbours' remains had to be gathered *"from the rubble of the building and the mess in the garden"* before they could be deposited in a coffin. After the funeral, the couple's daughter rummaged around in the garden, hoping to find something edible. But all she found was her father's arm.

Berliners became so used to seeing corpses and body parts in the streets that it no longer horrified them. Often, the inhabitants looked the other way to avoid having to deal with the atrocities.

"An image from the street: a man pushing a wheelbarrow with a dead woman on top, stiff as a board. Loose grey strands of hair fluttering, a blue kitchen apron. Her withered legs in grey stockings sticking out the end of the wheelbarrow. Hardly anyone gave her a second glance," noted Anonyma.

The diarist was still physically fit herself, noting that *"each new day of life is a day of triumph"*. But on the morning of 25th April, it became frighteningly clear that enemy shells would soon not be the only thing disturbing the residents' sleep:

"The Volkssturm has retreated. Ivan is pushing right toward us. German artillery has pulled up on our corner; the explosions are booming through the basement."

It was only a matter of time before the Ivans would pay a visit to the cellar.

The ring closed around Berlin

25th April was a satisfying day for Zhukov and Konev. While some of their troops had surged towards central Berlin from the north, east and south, other troops ►

FACTS

The Germans used a simple but effective tactic in the defence of Berlin.

Snipers and machine guns were positioned on the roofs and upper floors where Soviet tanks could not reach. Meanwhile, soldiers with Panzerfäuste lay in wait behind basement windows, from where they could ambush the enemy as they drove down the street.

Soviets surrounded Berlin and attacked from all sides



When it encircled Berlin, the Red Army ensured that the Western Allied troops could not spoil the Soviets' triumph – at the same time, Stalin's soldiers were able to press in on the centre of the capital from all sides.

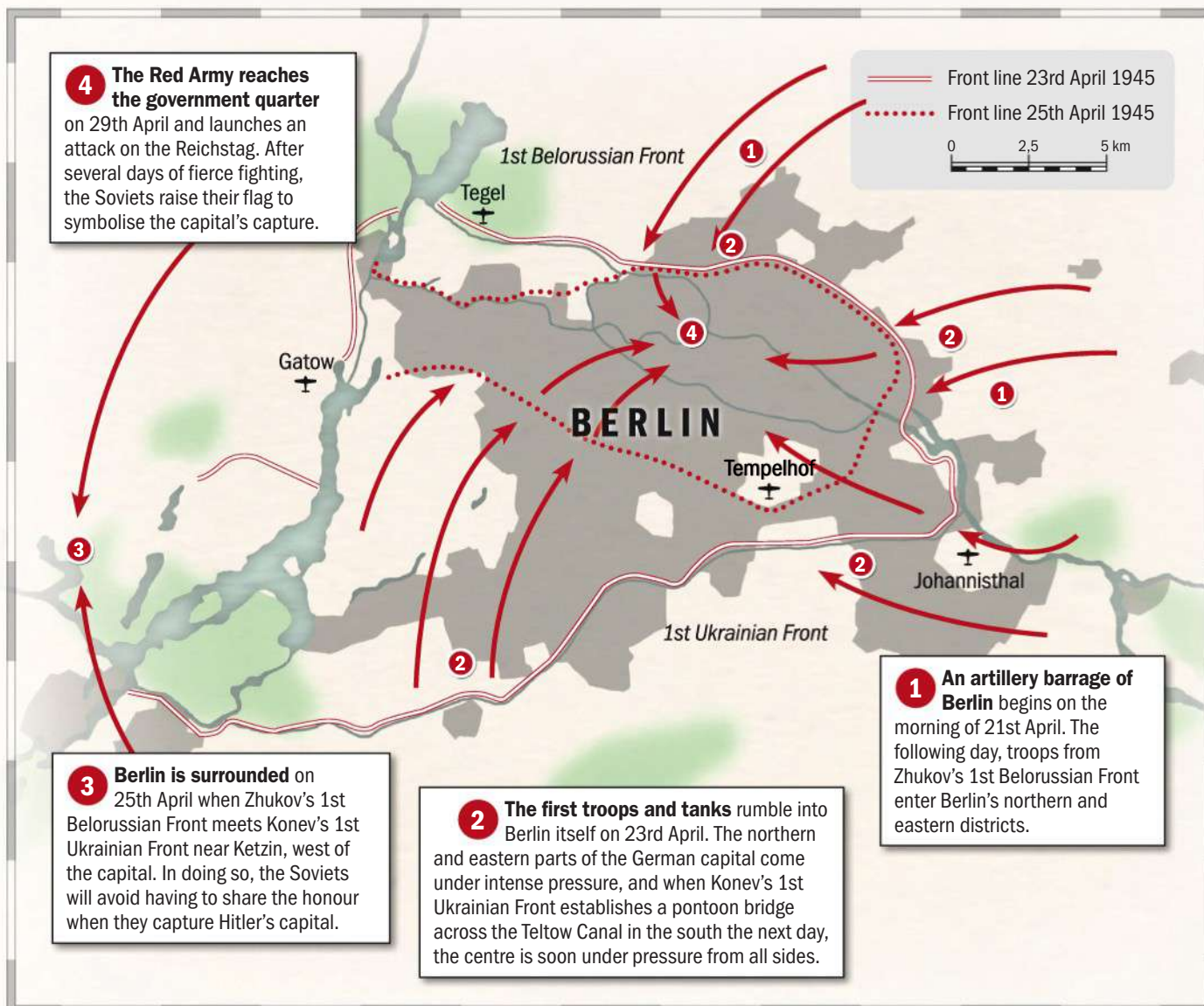
Nothing was left to chance when, in April 1945, the Red Army planned how to secure the biggest scalp of the war, Hitler's capital. Stalin had told the Americans on 1st April 1945 that "Berlin has lost its former strategic importance" and that the Soviets would deploy only small forces against the capital. However, Stalin's claim was little more than a gigantic April

Fool's joke, a massive bluff to mask the fact he sent his two strongest cards – the star marshals Zhukov and Konev – to Berlin, where they were to encircle the city as quickly as possible and ensure that no Western Allies interfered with the Soviet conquest of the capital to steal the honour from the Red Army.

By surrounding Berlin, the Red Army gained another advantage, as the heavily superior Soviet troops (both numerically and in terms of firepower) could squeeze the capital like a lemon from all sides until the German defences were drained to the last drop.



The fiercest fighting took place in the city centre, where the Nazis were entrenched.



The door above is ajar and lets in a little light. One man stands there keeping watch, while the other tears my underclothes. ■ German woman who called herself Anonyma.

had headed west of the capital. At midday, the forward troops of Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front spotted their compatriots from Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front near the town of Ketzin, 45 km west of the centre of Berlin. In bright sunshine, the Soviets exited their vehicles and embraced each other warmly as if they were old friends who had not seen each other for decades.

Stalin received the news enthusiastically in Moscow, and the Soviet troops travelling through the city of Berlin itself were reassured by the news that the Americans could no longer deprive the Red Army of its chance to capture the capital. The target ahead was the Reichstag in the centre of Berlin. Stalin and Zhukov had declared that the planting of the red flag on the Reichstag building would symbolise the end of the war, and later on 25th April, the Ivans felt that the trophy, with its great steel and glass dome, was one step closer when the first Soviet artillery shells slammed into the building in the centre of the government quarter.

"Poor inner city," wrote one diarist.

However, the advance from almost every corner of the compass towards the centre of Berlin also caused problems, as the Soviets suddenly risked hitting each other with their shells. But the officers were not

overly worried. They all headed off towards the Reichstag, hoping that one of their units would be the one to take the big scalp. Reporter Vasily Grossman witnessed the race, which one general of an infantry corps did not try to hide:

"There's a cheerful excitement at Rosly's headquarters. He says: 'We fear our neighbours now, not the enemy.' He says laughing: 'I've given orders to place burned-out tanks on the way to the Reichstag ... so as to block our neighbours. The greatest disappointment in Berlin is when you learn about your neighbour's success.'"

Conditions for those Germans still fighting had deteriorated. Because they were rarely near water pumps, they had to quench their thirst in the filthy canals, where both rubble and corpses floated. Still, it was exhaustion rather than bad stomachs that caused their collapse. Others suffered nervous breakdowns from the constant artillery fire and curled up in the foetal position among the heaps of rubble.

Dropped Soviet leaflets explained to German soldiers that it was *"hopeless to fight on"*, and other leaflets acted as *"safe-conduct"* passes that Germans could hand over to Soviet soldiers if they ►

Everyday life was dangerous for women in Berlin. Despite the battle raging around them, they still had to manage the household while keeping an eye out for rapists.



surrendered. Many chose to do so, although the Soviet claim that “almost 50 percent of Germans who surrendered in Berlin” carried these notes is probably exaggerated. Meanwhile, the Nazis tried to stir up the defenders. On the morning of 26th April, Martin Bormann issued an appeal to Gauleiters:

“Stand fast, fight fanatically. We are not giving up. We are not surrendering.”

Ivans raped at will

Incendiary speeches and pep talks did not change the critical situation for the remaining German defence forces in Berlin. On 27th April, they were squeezed into an area around 5 km wide and 15 km long. It ran roughly from Charlottenburg in the west to Alexanderplatz in the east. For the anonymous diarist, 27th April was also the day when the Red Army arrived in her street and fear broke out among the residents.

“They’re here,” whispered a woman in the basement early in the morning. *“They’ve just climbed through the windows at Meyer’s.”*

Anonyma was suddenly wide awake. She would later name the day

as *“Day of catastrophe, wild turmoil”* in her diary. The arrival of the Soviets immediately caused anxiety among the inhabitants of Anonyma’s apartment block. The residents had initially entrenched themselves in the basement, but in the afternoon a Soviet soldier forced his way into the shelter, shining his flashlight on the petrified women’s faces. Everyone froze when the beam hit an 18-year-old girl.

“How many year?” he asked in broken German.

Fortunately, Anonyma knew a little Russian from her previous travels in the Soviet Union, and with a bit of cunning she talked the soldier out of taking anyone with him. A few hours later, however, she found herself in the spotlight when two other Ivans caught her in the dark corridor leading to the basement room. She knew immediately that she was in trouble, but there would be no help from her fellow residents:

“I scream and scream ... I hear the basement door shutting with a dull thud behind me. One of them grabs my wrists and jerks me along the corridor. Then the other is pulling as well, his hand on my throat, so I can no longer scream... They’re both tearing away at me; instantly I’m on the floor... I end up with my head on the bottom step of



The Soviets reach the moat, but artillery fire forces them to cease all attacks during daylight.

Due to gunpowder smoke, Berlin quickly falls into darkness. The Red Army takes advantage to break through and enter the Reichstag.

Soviet forces reportedly plant the red flag on top of the Reichstag. However, fighting continues until the following evening.

the basement stairs. I can feel the damp coolness of the floor tiles. The door above is ajar and lets in a little light. One man stands there keeping watch, while the other tears my underclothes."

Both soldiers raped the woman, who struggled dazedly to her knees after her attackers had left:

"I pull myself up on the steps, gather my things, drag myself along the wall towards the basement door. They've locked it from the inside. 'Open up,' I say. 'I'm all alone, there's no one else.' Finally the two iron levers open. Everyone stares at me. Only then do I realise how I look. My stockings are down to my shoes, my hair is dishevelled, I'm still holding on to what's left of my garter. I start yelling. 'You pigs! Here they rape me twice in a row and you shut the door and leave me lying like a piece of dirt!'"

After the shame felt by the group had faded, several women accompanied the

diarist to the nearest Red Army commander to complain and seek future protection. The response was discouraging:

"Come on, I'm sure they didn't really hurt you. Our men are all healthy," was his dismissive reply.

Anonyma was just one of countless Berlin women raped by the Soviets in the first days after the arrival of the Red Army. While the rapes in East Prussia and other border regions were as much about exacting revenge on the Germans, the assaults in Berlin were more the result of soldiers exercising their 'right' to sexual gratification.

Berlin women, like their counterparts in the east, tried to avoid the Ivans by hiding.

In the Neukölln neighbourhood, 19-year-old

Gerda Petersohn was covered by a large pile of laundry in the basement when Soviet soldiers marched into

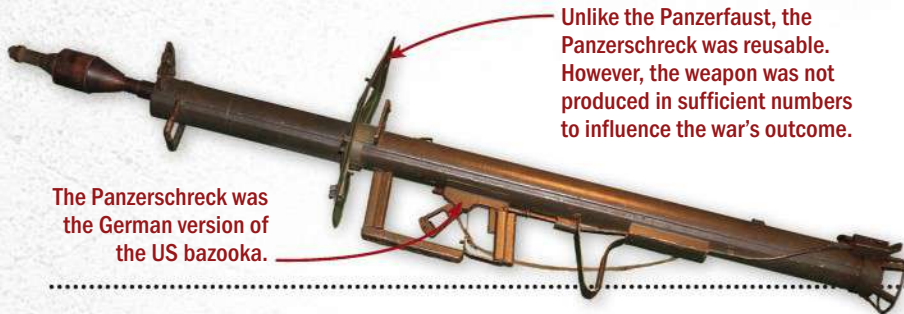
her apartment with machine guns. As the

teenager lay in hiding, a

soldier pointed at her older sister, who had just become ►

A dead SS soldier lies at the feet of a Soviet soldier. The SS were particularly unwilling to surrender.





The Panzerschreck was the German version of the US bazooka.

Unlike the Panzerfaust, the Panzerschreck was reusable. However, the weapon was not produced in sufficient numbers to influence the war's outcome.

a mother, and signalled for her to come with him. The sister resolutely picked up her infant on her lap and refused to let her go. The Ivan kept pointing, but when the sister did not let go of the child, he gave up and disappeared again.

The next night, Gerda and her sister hid on a balcony on the bombed-out top floor of the building, giving the infant malt tablets throughout the night to stop her crying and revealing their hiding place. The tactic thankfully worked.

Fifteen-year-old Christa Ronke was not so lucky during her first encounter with the Soviets in her family's property in the south-western neighbourhood of Dahlem. Here, "a blindfolded soldier" had taken her away and raped her, but then Christa and her mother came up with a plan to avoid future attacks:

"After this my mother and I thought over how to change. My mother changed into an old, ugly woman and I changed into an ugly, sick child. I cut

my hair and had a tooth lost here – I looked very ugly. And I was lying in bed when the next Russians came and my mother always said this word, that should be in Polish or in Russian 'sick child', when the Russians returned. Even one Russian soldier felt pity and gave me a piece of bread."

The Soviets returned again and again

Anonyma had become a sought-after target during the first day and a half that the Red Army poured into the street. The soldiers held drinking parties in the pharmacist's apartment on the first floor, where Anonyma had moved in with a male lodger because it was considered safer to have more people together. The drunken Russians enjoyed being able to speak a little of their native tongue with the educated woman, but when they got even the slightest urge, they threw themselves at her while the older widow sat crying.

On Saturday afternoon, 28th April, the diarist was raped again – this time by "an older man with grey stubble, reeking of brandy and horses" – but when she stood up and felt the usual aftershocks, she realised she had to do something:

"I stand up – dizzy, nauseated. My ragged clothes tumble to my feet. I stagger through the hall, past the sobbing widow, into the bathroom. I throw up. My face green in the mirror, my vomit in the basin. 'Damn this to hell!' I say it out loud. Then I make up my mind. No question about it: I have to find a single wolf to keep away the pack. An officer, as high-ranking as possible, a commandant, a general, whatever I can manage. After all, what are my brains for, my little knowledge of the enemy's language?"

Just a few hours later, Anonyma found a first lieutenant with black curls. He became her regular partner and made sure that no one but him molested her – exactly as planned. After a few days, the lieutenant had to leave the area, but the diarist managed to find "a new taboo". A lame-legged major who was gentle and kind and always brought gifts such as candles, milk, pork and butter – rare treasures for civilians in need. In hellish Berlin, the major became the diarist's saviour – because there was no other way out.

In all, well over 100,000 Berlin girls and women were raped by Soviet soldiers during the fighting – most of them repeatedly. Every night for about two weeks, their screams could be heard echoing through the capital's ruins. The two main hospitals in the city alone estimated that they treated between 95,000 and 130,000 rape victims, but to that figure must surely be added tens of thousands who, out of shame, chose not to seek help. In the apartment block opposite Anonyma, "a woman across the street jumped out a fourth-storey window when some Ivans were after her". Many others chose the same desperate escape from the crimes. One German



A group of elderly men from the Volkssturm surrendered as the Soviets collected piles of German weapons.

doctor estimated that around 10,000 rape victims died – most of them by suicide.

While Berlin's women were molested in the captured neighbourhoods, the Soviet advance continued into the heart of the capital. But the inner part of the city in particular – in and around the government quarter and other Nazi strongholds – remained quite heavily defended, and here the Nazi propagandists kept their victory hopes alive.

"Our task is clear. We stand firm and persevere! The Führer is with us. Where the Führer is, there is victory!" appeared as late as 29th April in *Der*

Panzerbär – The Armoured Bear – the propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels's *"Combat Paper for the Defenders of Greater Berlin"*.

The few who chose to believe any part of this were to be found mainly among Adolf Hitler's fanatical SS troops. While most of the men and boys of the Volksturm and Wehrmacht threw off their armbands and uniforms and went into hiding or surrendered, this was never an option for Hitler's elite corps. The SS were determined to fight to the last drop of blood in defence of their Führer. As the Soviets fought their way closer to the Reichstag, they were increasingly ►

The Red Army refined house-to-house combat

During the Battle of Stalingrad, the Soviets had developed effective tactics in urban warfare. Exactly the same techniques could be used in bombed-out Berlin, where soldiers were forced to fight for every building.

When the Germans lost the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943, one of the main reasons was the Soviet infantry tactics developed by General Vasily Chuikov during fighting in the ruined city. Since 1943, the Red Army had refined the tactics through numerous urban battles on the road to Berlin, with their shock troops – small units of 8-20 men – fearlessly storming German-held buildings.

The front assault group threw hand grenades through windows and holes in the walls, then stormed into the building, firing machine guns or spraying fire from flamethrowers. The Soviets

then worked their way from corridor to corridor, room to room, using the same technique:

"Chuck a grenade at every corner. Go forward. Fire bursts of machine-gun fire at any piece of ceiling which still remains. And when you get to the next room, chuck in another grenade. Then clean it up with your sub-

machine gun. Never waste a moment," was Chuikov's instruction.

Often the Soviets also used knives and sharpened spades to kill surviving enemies, as the primitive stabbing and bludgeoning weapons didn't risk jamming or running out of ammunition during the attack.

Once the assault group had cleared a building, reinforcement groups moved in with machine guns and armoured weapons. The heavy weapons of the reinforcement groups came into play when the Soviets needed to blast their way into the neighbouring building.



In Stalingrad the Soviets developed tactics for urban combat. This experience would prove particularly valuable during the Battle of Berlin.

Those traitors who hoist the white flag on their homes no longer have a right to the protection of the community. ■ Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda.

astonished that the SS soldiers continued to fight back so fiercely.

"We were amazed at the way the enemy kept fighting. It showed us the power of Goebbels's propaganda that a last stand should be made in Berlin. The overall position was hopeless – the city was cut off and our numerical superiority was overwhelming. However, the Germans did not give up, and SS units in particular would never surrender to us," recalled Captain Anatoly Mereshko.

Reconnaissance scout Mikhail Shinder also observed how the Nazis *"came across as fanatics"* – not least when he fought for control of the Berlin police department.

"It was a very strong building, and it was defended ferociously. Two battalions of our storm troops were trying to take it for two days, but our dead were lying in heaps on the square next to the wrecks of burnt-out T-34s," recalled Shinder, who with his own unit fought his way around the building and broke in through a side door:

"We began moving up the main staircase, tossing grenades into each room, followed by bursts of machine-gun fire."

When the Red Army reached the first floor, the Germans counter-attacked from the ground floor, turning the interior of the headquarters into a sea of fire with grenades and machine guns. Eventually, however, Shinder's men managed to capture the building, but his 36-man unit had been reduced to just nine. Such a counter-attack was an SS speciality, which the tenacious elite soldiers also carried out on 29th April at the Gestapo headquarters on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße. Here the Soviets had to temporarily withdraw from the building.

Apart from the fact that the SS were often ardent Nazis who would fight for their ideology to the last, their fanatical defence also betrayed their awareness of the enemy's hatred for them and the atrocities they'd committed during the war. The elite German soldiers might as well fight to the death, because if they were captured, the Soviets would rather put a

bullet in their heads than send them to a prison camp. The SS's fanaticism also meant that right up to the final days and hours of the Battle of Berlin, they faithfully followed Hitler and Goebbels's orders to deal ruthlessly with *"plague bacillus"* – people who showed the slightest inclination to surrender.

"Those traitors who hoist the white flag on their homes no longer have a right to the protection of the community. All the occupants of such buildings will be regarded as traitors," Goebbels declared.

SS units therefore used expensive ammunition to fire on buildings where the inhabitants had hung white pillowcases or sheets out of the windows. These SS execution squads even spent time entering the *"traitorous"* buildings, kicking in the doors and shooting all the men in the flats. The same death sentence awaited soldiers and Volkssturm members who did not show the required combativeness.

"These flying courts martial are particularly active in our sector today. Most of them are very young SS officers with hardly a decoration between them, blind and fanatical," said one German Wehrmacht officer, who strongly criticised the cynical and futile executions.

Soviets suffered heavy losses

The tenacious resistance of the SS – and other Germans – was felt by the Red Army. Some 70,000 Soviet soldiers lost their lives in Berlin in just over a week, but Zhukov was still pushing to fulfil Stalin's wish for total victory before the great May Day celebrations in the Soviet Union. For the soldiers, however, it was hard to witness the bitter losses.

"The saddest thing was to see comrades who had survived the whole war die in those last days of fighting," noted Lieutenant Andrei Eshpai.

An editor of a Soviet military newspaper who was in Berlin to cover the victory was also horrified.

"What a terrible price we are paying for each step to victory," he wrote shortly before he himself was killed when a shell exploded nearby.

Still, the Red Army was determined to end the war, and the soldiers began to smell victory through the thick gunpowder smoke as troops from the 150th and 171st Rifle Divisions established a bridgehead on the Spree River less than 600 metres from the Reichstag. Among the men was Vladimir Pereverzev, who had just enough time to write a letter home to his nearest and dearest on 29th April 1945:

"Now we're tightening the circle round the centre of the city. I am just 500 metres from the Reichstag. We have already crossed the Spree and within a few days the Fritzes and the Hanses will be kaput. They are still writing on the walls that 'Berlin bleibt deutsch' but we say instead, 'Alles deutsch kaputt.' And it will turn out the way we say it. I wanted to send you my photo, which was taken, but we have ►



The Soviet M1931 howitzer was feared by German soldiers, who called the gun "Stalin's sledgehammer".

The howitzer had a range of 18 kilometres and fired shells weighing 100 kilograms.

The war was won when the red flag flew over the Reichstag, according to Soviet propaganda. The Soviets therefore poured all their forces into the attack on the building.



not had a chance to develop it. It's a pity because the photo would be very interesting: a sub-machine gun on my shoulder, a Mauser stuck into my belt, grenades at my side. There's a lot to hit Germans with. To cut a long story short, we'll be in the Reichstag tomorrow."

Pereverzev's self-confidence was unfortunately misplaced; he too was one of the Soviets to lose his life a few days before it was all over. He barely had time to seal the envelope on the letter before he was badly wounded. Pereverzev lay waiting for death while his comrades prepared for the following day's big attack. Before the assault, they received a final pep talk from Zhukov.

"Fellow soldiers, officers and commanders of the 1st Belorussian Front, let's mop up the last remaining strongholds of the enemy. We will finish off the Fascist beast in his lair with one last swift kick, and bring to a conclusion our complete triumph over Nazi Germany," exhorted the marshal, who now also knew that it would be he, and not Konev, who would have the honour of hammering the final nail into the German coffin in Berlin. In the early hours of the morning of 30th April, the Red Army prepared for the final act. Everyone was on

edge and almost obsessed with the idea of slaying the great prey, as the Reichstag had been labelled.

"Our troops were in a state of frenzy. We hauled up our guns, and fired at German fortified buildings at point-blank range. We just wanted to finish them off," recalled Lieutenant Mikhail Borisov.

Vasily Ustyugov of the Third Soviet Shock Army, who was sitting in a captured building close to the Reichstag, was stunned by the spectacle as the building came into view through the smoke:

"A dark grey building rose up before me, pockmarked with shellfire. It was a lunar landscape. In the nearby park, not a single tree had survived. All were charred stumps."

However, the constant bombardment of the Reichstag had not sucked the life out of the defenders. As Soviet infantrymen rushed towards the target, they were met with an inferno. The fire came not only from the Reichstag and the Tiergarten, but also from behind the Kroll Opera House, where the Nazis had established a stronghold. As an overture, the Germans let their machine guns peck away at the Soviets, and soon the rifles were accompanied by

Western Allies arrived in Berlin too late

The Soviets managed to encircle Berlin before the Western Allies arrived. Instead, the first meeting of the great powers took place on the Elbe.

On the Western Front in the winter of 1944-45, US and British forces were nowhere near as close to Berlin as the Red Army was on the Eastern Front, where the Ivans could literally stick their feet in the Oder River. As a result, the Western Allies' hopes of reaching the German capital before the Soviets had been all but abandoned until March, when US forces miraculously managed to cross the Rhine via an intact bridge at Remagen near Bonn.

At the end of March, the British also moved across the Rhine and the pace quickened. Churchill was keen to reach Berlin before Stalin, but General Eisenhower, who led the US troops along Berlin's latitudes, was unwilling to take great risks to secure the capital.

In his memoirs, Eisenhower wrote that Berlin was "politically and psychologically

important as the symbol of remaining German power", but that the Americans nevertheless judged that "it was not the logical nor the most desirable objective for the forces of the Western Allies".

US forces therefore did not reach the German capital until the Red Army had surrounded the city on 25th April. On the same day, US and Soviet forces met 135 kilometres south-east of Berlin at the town of Torgau on the Elbe. The Western and Eastern Fronts had merged, but much to the chagrin of many Berliners, their fate was left in the hands of the Ivans alone.

A victory hug was in order as Soviet and US troops finally met in the town of Torgau on the River Elbe.



artillery fire from on top of the bombed opera house. When the symphony of death finally stopped, the Ivans lay bathed in their own blood on Königsplatz between the Reichstag and the Kroll Opera House.

The Soviets realised that they had to capture the Kroll and other nearby buildings before the final assault on the Reichstag could start. It wasn't until late afternoon that the Red Army had secured the area around the Reichstag to the extent that they dared to send soldiers towards the parliament again.

"Then came a call for volunteers to storm the building. At the HQs and command posts the political officers explained to us that any red banner, any red cloth, hoisted over the Reichstag would be counted as the flag of victory. And any man who helped put it there would be awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union," recounted private soldier Mikhail Minin.

Minin was not among the very first troops who, with the help of two light mortars, blew a hole in the Reichstag's facade before storming the entrance hall of the building. A veritable massacre took place in the lobby and on the steps, with German defenders mowing down the attackers. But



The German Reichstag was a shell-shocked ruin after the Soviet assault, with the last Nazis entrenched in the symbolic building.

again and again, new hordes of Red Army soldiers arrived and captured parts of the large building. It was only after nightfall that Minin joined the dangerous mission, as he and four others attempted to plant the red flag as the fighting still raged through the building:

"There was shooting in the corridors. We kept climbing, firing into the air to keep the enemy out of the way and looking for an entry on to the roof of the building. We smashed down a locked door and clambered outside the Reichstag. And there we saw the statue Germania – we called it the 'Goddess of Victory' – and we rushed over to it. Everyone agreed that it was the best spot to raise the flag – the statue rose high above the parapet and was easily visible. I found a hole in the crown and inserted the metal pole in it. Then we stretched our flag along the pole and secured it. I was absolutely delighted that I was participating in this – that I, a simple private, had been assigned this job. I felt sheer joy – it was a kind of euphoria," Minin said.

Officially, the Red Army declared that the flag flew over the Reichstag at 22:40 on 30th April 1945. The exact time is disputed, but it was convenient for the Soviets that the historic moment took place 80 minutes before the May Day celebrations.

The fighting at the Reichstag went back and forth over the next 24 hours – and the Germans even managed to briefly take down the red flag again – but in the end the defenders capitulated.

Lieutenant Mikhail Borisov wrote his name on the masonry of the building, adding that *"this kid from Siberia got all the way to Berlin"*.

The Red Army quickly secured the area and soon swarmed into the Reich Chancellery and the Führerbunker. German generals surrendered in droves, but Hitler was nowhere to be found. It was as though the Führer had sunk into the ground. ■

FACTS

After the Battle of Berlin, **Soviet troops looted, raped and murdered** the city's inhabitants for several weeks. An estimated 100,000 Berlin women were raped.



Hitler's madness intensified in the final days of the Third Reich. In the Führerbunker in Berlin, those around him bore witness to his rapid decline.

HITLER'S DOWNFALL

I have already taken my decision. I will never leave Berlin again; I will defend the capital with my dying breath.

Adolf Hitler.

As the Allies crushed Germany, Hitler entrenched himself in the Führerbunker deep beneath Berlin. With him stood a group of devoted aides who had served him for years and would not abandon him in the face of disaster. Down in the bunker, they awaited the inevitable defeat as Hitler's madness grew.

By Troels Ussing

Hitler was used to being celebrated with pomp and circumstance on his birthday, but on 20th April 1945, he was almost ten metres underground, shielded from the outside world by layers of metres-thick concrete. For weeks Hitler had barricaded himself in the Führerbunker under the Reich Chancellery gardens as the city above him waited nervously for the enemy to march into its streets. In the damp and smelly basement, the once powerful leader of the Third Reich worked, ate and slept in small, low-ceilinged rooms separated from each other by narrow steel doors – a chilly underworld that most closely resembled the cabins and corridors found in a ship's keel, far beneath the water's surface.

The Führer had been congratulated earlier in the day by his faithful followers, headed by the skeletal Joseph Goebbels, but as dusk fell above, the 56-year-old birthday boy now sat in his study in the company of his mistress Eva Braun and his secretaries. Their glasses contained champagne, which 25-year-old secretary Traudl Junge occasionally sipped, but she had to look far and wide for any festive mood on this evening.

"In the evening we sat crammed together in the little study. Hitler was silent, staring into space. We too asked him if he wouldn't leave Berlin. 'No, I can't,' he replied. 'I must bring things to a head here in Berlin – or go under!' We said nothing, and the champagne we were drinking to Hitler's health tasted insipid," Junge later wrote in her memoirs.

Hitler had made his choice. He would stay in Berlin and await his fate. The Führer rose early from the table, broke up the birthday party and retired to his private quarters in the adjoining room.

"But Eva Braun came back once she had led Hitler to his room. A restless fire burned in her eyes. She had on a new dress made of silvery blue brocade; it was meant to be worn to a party at the side of the man she loved. Hitler hadn't noticed it. And he hadn't noticed that there were four young women at his table who wanted to live, who had believed in him, who had hoped for victory from him.

"Eva Braun wanted to numb the fear that had awoken in her heart. She wanted to celebrate again, even when there was nothing left to celebrate, she wanted to dance, to drink, to forget... Eva Braun carried off everyone she met on her way through the bunker up to her old living

room on the first floor which was still intact, although the good furniture was down in the bunker now. Eva Braun wanted to dance! Never mind who with, she whirled everyone away in a desperate frenzy, like a woman who has already felt the faint breath of death. We drank champagne, there was shrill laughter, and I laughed too because I didn't want to cry... No one said anything about war, victory or death. This was a party given by ghosts," Junge later recounted of the scene in the Reich Chancellery.

Hitler was a broken man

In his small bedroom in the Führerbunker, Hitler heard nothing of the party up in the Reich Chancellery. On the other hand, he was rudely awoken the next day at 09.30 by a constant banging noise from overhead – the Red Army's intensive artillery bombardment of Berlin had begun. The Führer angrily got out of bed and, unshaven, opened the metal door to one of the Führerbunker's corridors, where his SS adjutant, Otto Günsche, and General Wilhelm Burgdorf stood.

"What's going on?" yelled the Führer, a lock of hair hanging limply over one eye. *"Where's this firing coming from?"*

Burgdorf replied that parts of central Berlin were under fire from heavy Soviet artillery. Hitler remained silent for a moment, clearly shaken.

"Are the Russians already so near?" was the rattled Nazi leader's response.

Since the 20th July attack in 1944 and the successful Soviet offensive in 1945, Hitler's leadership had faded day by day. No more polemic speeches – in public, Goebbels did the talking – so now the Führer wandered the bunker more and more apathetically, his left leg dragging behind him, a reminder of the injury sustained in the 1944 assassination attempt. Hitler's bodyguard and telephone operator, Rochus Misch, who had been close to the Führer for most of the war, clearly noticed the change.

"The last months had not passed Hitler by without leaving their mark. Every defeat, every setback, every act of treason – real or imagined – from within his closest circle contributed to his clearly recognisable physical decay. Now his gait was sluggish, and he dragged a leg. The eyes ►

FACTS

For much of the war, Hitler stayed at the Wolf's Lair in what is now Poland, from where he was better able to direct the **fighting on the Eastern Front**. From 16th January 1945, however, the Führerbunker in Berlin became Hitler's primary residence.

Hitler's faithful secretary
*Traudl Junge remained in
the Führerbunker with
Hitler and saw the madness
with her own eyes.*



THE REASON WHY...

...Hitler didn't try to escape Berlin

Adolf Hitler had realised that defeat was imminent as the Red Army stood at the gates of Berlin. For the Führer, staying and dying in the battle for the capital would create the best narrative.

On Hitler's birthday and in the days that followed, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, Himmler and Dönitz all tried to persuade the Führer to leave Berlin while there was still time and flee south to his country estate at Berghof, in the Bavarian Obersalzberg. From there he could take command of the southern armies.

But Hitler refused – mainly because he feared being captured alive. Escaping Berlin would be no easy matter, and if the Soviets were to take him alive, it would be a major propaganda victory for Stalin. Hitler did not want to be portrayed as a pathetic, dethroned dictator. It would be such a blow to his ego that he was determined to take his own life before the Allies got their hands on him.

For Hitler, dying in Berlin was a fitting way to end his era. In this way,

his death would coincide with that of the Reich's capital – amid shattered monuments and flame-swept buildings – and thus create the proper legend of the leader who fell with his people. During a meeting with Albert Speer on 23rd April 1945, Hitler took great satisfaction in the fact that his respected minister of armaments had just expressed the view that Berlin should be the Führer's final destination:

"Spontaneously, I advised him to stay in Berlin. What would he do at Obersalzberg? With Berlin gone, the war would be over in any case, I said. 'It seems to me better, if it must be, that you end your life here in the capital as the Führer rather than in your weekend house,'" Speer advised.

"I too have resolved to stay here. I only wanted to hear your view once more," Hitler replied.

often seemed to have no fixed point, while his sense of balance seemed disturbed. Above all, in his every movement he had slowed, and all in all he looked to me like an old man. His left hand trembled distinctly, something I had not noticed before, and though he did not fumble when accepting despatches, now he always used his right hand," Misch wrote in his memoirs.

During his visits to the Führerbunker, Minister of Armaments Albert Speer also noted how Hitler displayed signs of weakness that he had never shown before, when it had always been important for him to appear as a strong leader.

"When heavy bombs exploded in the vicinity this massive bunker shook... Hitler would give a start. What had become of the formerly fearless corporal of the First World War?" Speer wrote.

Traudl Junge had not known the Führer for as long as Misch and Speer. The secretary had become part of Hitler's office staff in December 1942, but although the fortunes of war were just beginning to turn for the Nazis at that point, her boss had then appeared quite different. The recklessness and determination of that time, the glowing and sparkling eyes, seemed a distant memory in the April days underground in 1945. The Führer that Junge and her colleagues had looked up to and in whose hands they'd placed their lives behaved at moments almost like a frightened little child:


"He retreated to be with his dogs, which were now being kept in a cubicle near the lavatories. Then he sat in silence on the little bench in the corridor with the puppy on his lap, watching people coming and going... A hopelessly disappointed man, toppled from the greatest heights, broken, lonely."

Hitler had also lost his astonishing grasp of detail and statistics, which he had previously used to effectively put his doubters in their place. He no longer displayed the same authority and vigour around the conference table. On the other hand, the

Führer's baleful outbursts of anger grew in frequency as his staff provided updates and reports in the bunker's small conference room. Junge and Misch could hear the Führer's voice cutting through the steel door during the daily meetings when Hitler became dissatisfied with the course of the war and the generals' proposed solutions.

According to the bodyguard, Hitler now trusted no one:

"Over the last few months he had grown increasingly distrustful of



Commit suicide in Berlin, Albert Speer (left) advised his Führer. In this way, the legend of Hitler would grow.

You will see – the Russians are about to suffer the bloodiest defeat of their history at the gates of Berlin! ■ Adolf Hitler.

his entourage, and now, shortly before the defeat, this distrust reached its zenith. Behind every contradiction he detected treachery; everywhere he suspected disinformation. He was fidgety, nervous and looked depressed."

As Hitler sat at the table in the bunker's conference room on 21st April, he was still struggling to comprehend that the Red Army was already so close to Berlin that its shells could reach the city. Military advisers Wilhelm Keitel, Alfred Jodl, Hans Krebs, Wilhelm Burgdorf and Martin Bormann could do nothing but share Hitler's despair, but the fact remained that Zhukov's troops were rapidly approaching the outskirts of the German capital.

Hitler concocted outlandish plans

Hitler and his staff clung to what hopes they could of victory. The enemy's advancing column north of the capital was long and therefore a vulnerable target. Here the Soviets might be hit. When word came that Colonel-General Gotthard Heinrici, commanding Army Group Vistula, had assembled a reserve under SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner, Hitler's mood suddenly improved. He trusted an SS man like Steiner and stripped Heinrici of his reserve army. Instead, Steiner was to cut the advancing Soviet lines and reach Berlin that way.

"You [Steiner], personally, are answerable with your head for the execution of this order. The fate of the Reich capital depends on the success of your mission," the Führer said.

Hitler himself was immediately pleased with his plan, and his staff officers saw he was more hopeful than he had been for a long time.

"You will see – the Russians are about to suffer the bloodiest defeat of their history at the gates of Berlin!" Hitler confidently predicted to his officers.

The next day, however, the Führer woke up to another shock. Steiner's troops had not moved from their location, never mind spearheaded an advance during the morning. The SS senior group leader had tacitly decided not to follow Hitler's orders.

Steiner had bitterly informed Heinrici that he had barely any artillery, only a handful of tanks and a few anti-aircraft guns. Both men refused to send their soldiers straight to their deaths. Instead, Steiner ordered his troops away from Berlin to save them from Soviet captivity.

Traudl Junge and her colleagues clearly felt the *"feverish restlessness"* that characterised the bunker the morning after the news:

"The doors of Hitler's conference room are closed. There's an agitated discussion in progress behind them ... We hear voices rising and falling. Hitler shouts something, but we can't make out what. Martin Bormann comes out looking agitated and hands Fraulein Kriiger some sheets to be typed out



In the centre of Berlin was the Führerbunker, which would become Hitler's final residence.

immediately. For a moment we see uniformed backs bent over the street map of Berlin. The meeting looks baffled. Distraught, we move back into the anteroom, where we smoke, wait, whisper."

Behind the conference room doors, Hitler had been cursing and swearing at Steiner, almost purple in the face. The Führer's voice cracked repeatedly as he screamed about *"cowardice, treachery, incompetence, insubordination, disloyalty"*. He finally announced to the staff what he had hinted to the secretaries and Braun on his birthday:

"I have already taken my decision. I will never leave Berlin again; I will defend the capital with my dying breath. Either I direct the battle for the Reich capital ... or I shall go down with my troops in Berlin, fighting for the symbol of the Reich," Hitler said with his usual sense of pathos, before proclaiming that he would shoot himself when and if the time came.

When the heavy steel door to the conference room finally opened, Junge noticed all the officers had *"white, stony faces"*. Hitler himself trudged towards his study, passing his secretary who was standing with Braun in the corridor:

"All the expression has vanished from his face; his eyes are blank. He looks like his own death mask. He says, 'Get changed at once. A plane is leaving in an hour and will take you south. All is lost, hopelessly lost.'"

"I am frozen rigid ... Eva Braun is the first to rouse herself. She goes towards Hitler, who has already placed his hand on the handle of his door, takes both his hands and says, smiling and in the comforting tones you might use to a sad child, 'But you know I shall stay with you. I'm not letting you send me away.' Then Hitler's eyes begin to shine from within, and he does something none of us, not even his closest friends and servants, have ever seen him do before: he kisses Eva Braun on the ▶



Herr and Frau Hitler.
*Only at the very end
did Eva Braun wed
the love of her life.*

I would rather have my children die than live in disgrace, jeered at. Our children have no place in Germany as it will be after the war. ■ Magda Goebbels.

mouth... I don't want to stay here and I don't want to die, but I can't help it. 'I'm staying too,' I say."

A large part of Hitler's entourage made the same choice. They had decided to remain in the bunker with their Führer.

Wenck appointed new saviour

In the bunker, the listless Führer constantly vacillated between despair and vain hopes of an imminent rescue. On the afternoon of 22nd April, the general staff gathered again in the stuffy conference room to look for a new way out. The solution came from Jodl: Berlin's new liberator would be the 44-year-old Walther Wenck – the army's youngest general.

Wenck's Twelfth Army was west of Berlin, holding the Western Allies at bay on the Elbe. But there was little indication that the Americans would make any serious attempt to cross the river. So Wenck could turn back and save Berlin. Finally, Hitler heard something he liked and, according to Traudl Junge, *"once more rouses himself from his lethargy"*.

"Soldiers of Wenck's army! ... Your Fuhrer has summoned you, and you have gone into the attack as in the days of conquest. Berlin is waiting for you!" stated the Führer's Order, words that were also broadcast on the streets of Berlin to boost morale.

Although a whiff of hope momentarily seeped through the bunker, the underground community was still primarily characterised by despair. The fact that Hitler began rummaging around in cupboards and drawers to root out papers and documents to be burned in the Reich Chancellery's garden did not exactly signify that the Führer wholeheartedly believed in the Reich's salvation. By the evening meal on 22nd April – just a few hours after naming Wenck as Berlin's saviour – Hitler's mood had again changed.

"He was getting more oddly behaved and difficult to understand all the time. Just as yesterday he hadn't said a word to suggest that he didn't think victory certain, today he said with equal conviction that there was no longer any hope for a change in the situation," Junge recalled.

Hitler also sent for Joseph and Magda Goebbels and the couple's six children, whose names all began with 'H' in honour of the Führer. They were summoned to remain in the bunker until the bitter end, along with 'Uncle Hitler'. For Traudl Junge – and many others in the bunker – it was heartbreaking to see the small children running around the concrete labyrinth, knowing that the five girls and one boy were living on borrowed time, even though the children's smiles and laughter provided a much-needed respite from the otherwise life-sapping grey and gloomy surroundings:

"The six children play in the corridors, happy and contented. They read their fairy-tales at the round table on a landing on the stairs, halfway down to the deepest part of the bunker. They don't

hear the explosions getting louder and louder, they feel safe with 'Uncle Führer'. In the afternoon they drink chocolate with their 'uncle' and tell him what they have been doing at school. Helmut, the only boy, reads aloud the composition he wrote for Hitler's birthday. 'You stole that from Daddy,' says his sister Helga. And the adults laugh when the boy replies, 'Or Daddy stole it from me.'"

The hours crept by in the bunker over the following days. Occasionally, a breathless, sweating officer covered in dust would rush down into the depths to report on the Red Army tanks' latest advances, but gradually Hitler became silent and disinterested as he listened to the news.

The women mostly sought each other's company in the bunker, where they tried to talk about anything and everything so as not to constantly think about death: *"Sometimes we slip upstairs, wait for a pause in the artillery fire, and are horrified to see the devastation spreading further and further. We are surrounded by ruins and the remains of buildings ... But my feelings are deadened, I feel quite hollow. There is nothing real or natural left about us,"* Junge wrote.

Eva Braun also often joined the secretaries, confiding to Junge of her *"extraordinary worries"*. The women often played with the dogs and children, not least because Magda Goebbels was barely able to appear calm around her children. Whenever she was with them, she would burst into tears afterwards. But her mind was made up:

"I would rather have my children die than live in disgrace, jeered at. Our children have no place in Germany as it will be after the war," she told Junge.

The nights felt at least as long as the days. Junge and the other secretaries slept on mattresses and cots in the conference room, listening to the snoring of Krebs, Burgdorf and Bormann, who now spent their nights in the soft armchairs in the corridor. But there wasn't much sleep.

"Sometimes we snatch an hour of sleep, but our nervousness soon wakes us again. We want to be ►►

Objects from Hitler's Führerbunker are highly sought after by collectors today.



This phone was taken from the Führerbunker by a Red Army soldier.



Hitler lived in a hole

During the last days of the war, the bunker was Berlin's safest and most comfortable place. Yet the Führerbunker did not meet the standards to which Hitler had previously been accustomed.

Hitler's bunker beneath the Reich Chancellery in Berlin was protected by thick concrete walls and ceilings that shielded the Führer from enemy shells.

As early as 1936, Hitler had his Führerbunker constructed 8.5 metres below the Reich Chancellery's gardens, so that he could be safe from enemy bombs and shells during air raids. From February 1945, Hitler began sleeping in the bunker every night, and in April, he became a permanent resident in the deep concrete dwelling when he ceased working in the chancellery during the day. With him underground were his closest associates.

The Führerbunker's three-metre-thick ceilings and 2.5-metre-thick walls could withstand anything, although the underground shelter did shake when shells fell directly above it. From a medical room to a furnished living room, the Führerbunker possessed its own electricity and water supply – a tiny self-sufficient community isolated from the rest of Berlin.

HITLER'S BEDROOM was placed in one corner of the bunker, where the construction was strongest in theory.

HITLER'S LIVING ROOM, where he and Eva Braun spent their days, was furnished with a floral sofa and two armchairs. The couple committed suicide on the sofa.

HITLER'S STUDY was tiny, yet the Führer often sat here to eat. It was also here that Hitler wrote his will, with Traudl Junge at the typewriter.

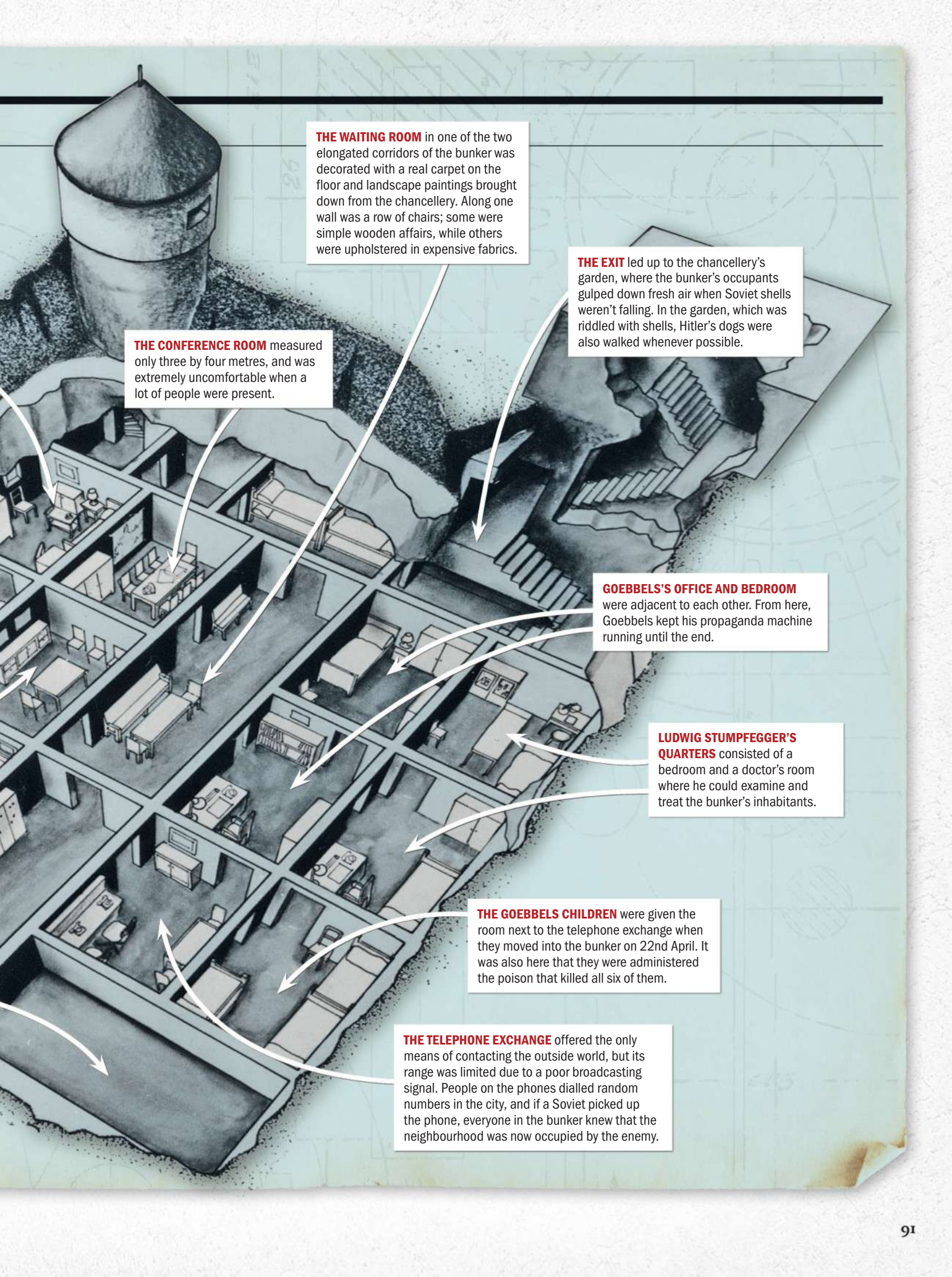
EVA BRAUN'S ROOM offered combined sleeping and living quarters and adjoined Hitler's study. It meant Braun also had a relatively close relationship with Hitler's secretaries.

THE ENGINE ROOM housed a diesel generator, which provided energy for the lighting and ventilation systems. A pumping system also kept water out of the bunker, but because it was below the groundwater level, the bunker's climate was always damp and humid.

ENTRANCE from the Reich Chancellery. Several staircases and winding corridors had to be negotiated to reach the bunker.



Among those closest to him, such as Joseph Goebbels's wife and children, Hitler was seen to be an attentive and friendly man in the early years of the war. By April 1945, the Führer had become introverted, distracted and sullen.



THE WAITING ROOM in one of the two elongated corridors of the bunker was decorated with a real carpet on the floor and landscape paintings brought down from the chancellery. Along one wall was a row of chairs; some were simple wooden affairs, while others were upholstered in expensive fabrics.

THE CONFERENCE ROOM measured only three by four metres, and was extremely uncomfortable when a lot of people were present.

THE EXIT led up to the chancellery's garden, where the bunker's occupants gulped down fresh air when Soviet shells weren't falling. In the garden, which was riddled with shells, Hitler's dogs were also walked whenever possible.

GOEBBELS'S OFFICE AND BEDROOM were adjacent to each other. From here, Goebbels kept his propaganda machine running until the end.

LUDWIG STUMPFEGGER'S QUARTERS consisted of a bedroom and a doctor's room where he could examine and treat the bunker's inhabitants.

THE GOEBBELS CHILDREN were given the room next to the telephone exchange when they moved into the bunker on 22nd April. It was also here that they were administered the poison that killed all six of them.

THE TELEPHONE EXCHANGE offered the only means of contacting the outside world, but its range was limited due to a poor broadcasting signal. People on the phones dialled random numbers in the city, and if a Soviet picked up the phone, everyone in the bunker knew that the neighbourhood was now occupied by the enemy.

there when news that General Wenck is attacking arrives. We keep venturing out into the hell above us and listening, hoping to hear the thunder of German guns at last," Junge said of the atmosphere.

The betrayals continued

The residents of the Führerbunker waited in vain for Wenck's rescue. The young general had other plans than saving Hitler and his capital. Although Wenck was directing his troops to the east as ordered, it was to rescue fellow general Theodor Busse, whose Ninth Army had been surrounded by the Red Army south of Berlin. Together, the two generals would then attempt to fall into US rather than Soviet hands.

Wenck was far from the only one who had stopped following Hitler's orders. The Führer's otherwise loyal and close friend, architect Albert Speer, had for weeks systematically neglected to follow the Führer's Nero Decree, because the minister of armaments considered it insane to destroy all German industry and infrastructure in an absurd last-ditch attempt to slow down the enemy's advance. Hitler, however, caught

wind of the failure and summoned Speer to the Führer's bunker on 27th April.

"Bormann has given me a report on your conference with the Ruhr Gauleiters. You pressed them not to carry out my orders and declared that the war is lost. Are you aware of what must follow from that?" Hitler said, before uncharacteristically letting his minister and friend off the hook for treason: *"If you were not my architect, I would take the measures that are called for in such a case."*

In his hour of need, senior Nazis were virtually lining up to betray their Führer. A few days earlier, Reich Marshal Göring had telegraphed Hitler his readiness to take over the leadership of Nazi Germany if the Führer had indeed given up. A furious Hitler responded by dismissing Göring and issuing a warrant for his arrest. An even heavier blow struck the dictator on 28th April, when his press attaché delivered a copy of a Reuters telegram revealing that the Reichsführer of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, had been negotiating with the Allies through Swiss diplomat Count Bernadotte.

Hitler's face turned alternately white and purple with shock and rage. He was now

Goebbels's six children were all poisoned. Standing at the back in uniform is Magda's son from her first marriage, Harald Quandt.



convinced that Himmler's SS was also planning a coup against him.

The whole world was collapsing around the Führer as his authority dissipated. Reports that the commander of Army Group Weichsel, Heinrici, had also stopped sending his troops to their deaths in the defence of Berlin also arrived, so Keitel had to sack him.

"Where is Wenck?" was soon the only thing Hitler could utter – if only because he did not yet know that the young general had decided to ignore his call.

During meals with the secretaries and Eva Braun, Hitler tapped his mashed potatoes with resignation.

"The army has betrayed me, the generals are no good for anything. My orders haven't been carried out. It's finally over," he declared in despair, before sharing his plans for his impending suicide:

"I will not fall into the enemy's hands either dead or alive. When I'm dead, my body is to be burned so that no one can ever find it. The best way is to shoot yourself in the mouth. Your skull is shattered and you don't notice anything. Death is instantaneous."

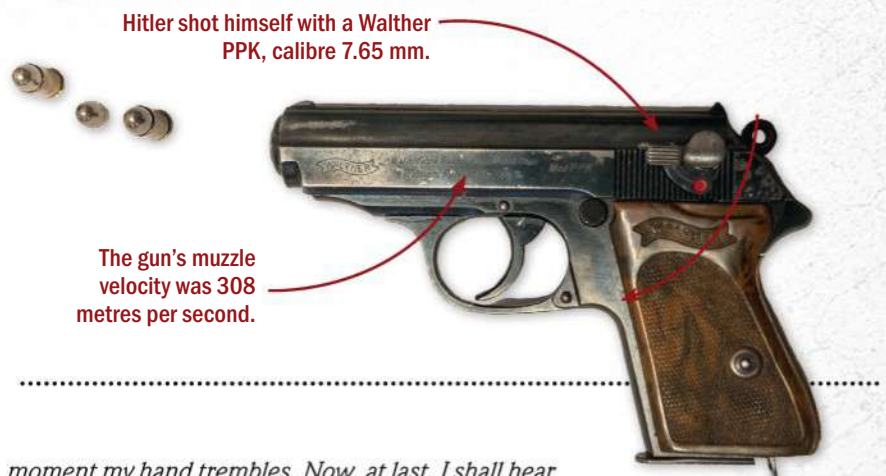
According to Traudl Junge, the women around the table shuddered at the thought of such a death:

"I want to be a beautiful corpse," said Eva Braun, 'I shall take poison.' And she took a little brass capsule containing a phial of cyanide from the pocket of her elegant dress. 'I wonder if it hurts very much? I'm so frightened of suffering for a long time,' she confessed. 'I'm ready to die heroically, but at least I want it to be painless.' Hitler told us that death by this poison was completely painless. Your nervous and respiratory systems were paralysed, and you died within a few seconds. And this 'comforting' thought made Frau Christian and me ask the Führer for poison capsules, too. Himmler had given him ten, and when we left him after the meal he personally gave each of us one, saying, 'I am very sorry that I can't give you a better farewell present.'"

Braun finally became a bride

Thoughts of her impending fate in the bunker filled Junge's head and constantly disrupted her sleep. When the secretary awoke on her cot shortly after midnight between 28th and 29th April, she heard activity outside in the corridor and within Hitler's chambers. Servants and orderlies came and went. Junge opened the door to Hitler's study and was greeted by her boss:

"The Führer comes towards me, shakes hands and asks, 'Have you had a nice little rest, child?' When, surprised, I say yes, he adds, 'There's something I'd like you to take down from dictation.' I sit down alone at the big table and wait ... Then, suddenly, the Führer utters the first words. 'My political testament.' For a



Hitler shot himself with a Walther PPK, calibre 7.65 mm.

The gun's muzzle velocity was 308 metres per second.

moment my hand trembles. Now, at last, I shall hear what we've been waiting for... an explanation of what has happened, a confession, even a confession of guilt, or perhaps a justification ... But my expectations are not fulfilled. In tones of indifference, almost mechanically, the Führer comes out with the explanations, accusations and demands that I, the German people and the whole world know already ... He pauses for a brief moment, and then begins dictating his private will. And now I discover that he is going to marry Eva Braun before they are united in death."

As Junge typed out three versions of Hitler's will, several people gathered in the conference room where the impending wedding was to take place. At a time when Hitler faced only betrayal and rejection, he would finally marry Braun so someone would declare their love for him. Goebbels had sent for the Nazi official Walter Wagner, who had the authority to perform weddings. Wagner had temporarily removed his Volkssturm armband before being taken to the bunker in an armoured personnel carrier. He now stood before the bride and groom, flanked by Hitler's devoted supporters Goebbels and Bormann, who bore witness to the ceremony.

"In the presence of the above-mentioned witnesses, I ask you, my Führer Adolf Hitler, whether you are willing to enter into matrimony with Miss Eva Braun. If such is the case, I ask you to reply yes," Wagner stammered.

Wearing his usual uniform jacket, Hitler responded in the affirmative, before Wagner turned to Eva Braun, who eagerly gave her yes back to the official.

"Now, since both these engaged persons have stated their willingness to enter into matrimony, I herewith declare the marriage valid before the law," Wagner concluded, before returning to the streets of Berlin to once again defend the capital's last remaining inner circle.

After 14 years as the Führer's mistress, Braun had finally become Frau Hitler, and out in the corridor generals and secretaries stood ready to congratulate the couple before the newly-weds retired to the ►

small sitting room for a wedding breakfast and champagne. The honeymoon lasted only a few hours and was not marked by dreams of a long and happy future together. Soviet artillery fire continually thundered overhead, reminding everyone of the short time left. His role as bodyguard was largely played out for Rochus Misch once the Führer had decided to die, so the 27-year-old SS man remained mainly in the bunker's communications room:

"Meanwhile, the noose around our necks grew ever tighter. It was clear to all that at any moment the Russians could storm the bunker. I still had lines to almost all Berlin, and so I rang civilians at random to find out where the Red Army was. I discovered later that the Russians were doing exactly the same in order to establish their own frontline. It was dreadfully stuffy in my small switchboard, and made me sleepy. I approved a few cognacs for myself."

On the morning of 30th April, the Soviets launched their attack on the Reichstag building where it was clear that the enemy would soon reach the chancellery. Lunch that day was Hitler's last meal before he told his adjutant Otto Günsche in the afternoon that it was time to say goodbye to his loyal supporters in the bunker. Junge remembered the farewell vividly:

"Günsche comes up to me. 'Come on, the Führer wants to say goodbye.' I rise and go out into the corridor... I vaguely realise there are other people there too. But all I really see is the figure of the Führer. He comes very slowly out of his room, stooping more than ever, stands in the open doorway and shakes hands with everyone. I feel his right hand warm in mine, he looks at me but he isn't seeing me. He seems to be far away. He says something to me, but I don't hear it. I didn't take in his last words. The moment we have been waiting for has come now, and I am frozen and scarcely notice what's going on around me. Only when Eva Braun comes over to me is the spell broken a little. She smiles and embraces me. 'Please do try to get out. You may yet make your way through. And give Bavaria my love,' she says, smiling but with a sob in her voice. She is wearing the Führer's favourite dress, the black one with the roses at the neckline,

and her hair is washed and beautifully done. Like that, she follows the Führer into his room – and to her death. The heavy iron door closes."

Junge needed to get as far away as possible, but on her way up the stairs she saw the Goebbels children sitting on the steps. They looked lost. No one had remembered to give them lunch, so Junge followed the children to the round table at the landing, where she made them some sandwiches:

"They say something about being safe in the bunker, and how it's almost fun to hear the explosions when they know the bangs can't hurt them. Suddenly there is the sound of a shot, so loud, so close that we all fall silent. It echoes on through all the rooms. 'That was a direct hit,' cried Helmut, with no idea how right he is."

Bodies were doused in petrol

The gunfire in Hitler's chambers shattered the silence in the bunker when the Führer fired his pistol just before 15:15. Hitler had shot himself in the mouth at the same time as biting his vial of cyanide in half. His skull was shattered. Eva Braun had only taken the poison.

Misch and some of Hitler's loyal staff crowded into the corridor, which stood completely silent after the shot rang out.

"Linge placed his ear to the door of the anteroom. He and Günsche opened the first door to the anteroom. They advanced slowly to Hitler's study door. Nobody drew breath. The second door was opened. I took a few steps forward and craned my neck. I looked for only a few seconds but I have never forgotten what I saw.

"My glance fell first on Eva. She was seated with her legs drawn up, her head inclined towards Hitler. Her shoes were under the sofa. Near her – I cannot remember whether on the sofa or the armchair near it – the dead Hitler. His eyes were open and staring, his head had fallen forward slightly. I saw no blood," Misch wrote.

Günsche and Linge wrapped Hitler's body in an army blanket and carried it through the bunker and up to the Reich Chancellery gardens. Eva Braun's body was carried by Hitler's driver, Erich Kempka, who by then had also procured 200 litres of petrol to burn the bodies with. But Kempka almost dropped Frau Hitler's body on his way up the many steps to the garden:

"I had not reckoned with the weight and my strength failed... Halfway up Günsche hurried to assist me, and together we carried the body of Eva Hitler into the open ... Günsche and I lay Eva Hitler beside her husband ... Russian shells were exploding around us – it seemed that their artillery had suddenly doubled its bombardment.

"I rushed back to the shelter of the bunker, stopping for a moment, panting... Then I seized a cannister of petrol, ran out again and placed it



WALTHER WENCK (1900-1982)

The general was the youngest of all the commanders who took part in World War II. As the Third Reich approached its end, Wenck oversaw Berlin's final defence. Hitler hoped to the end that Wenck would turn adversity into victory, but the general instead spent his time saving his own troops.

Braun followed her husband in death

As a teenager, Eva Braun met Hitler and fell head over heels in love with him. It was not until 14 years later that the couple married, and the marriage lasted just over 24 hours.

In 1929, at the age of 17, Eva Paula Braun met Germany's future Führer when she was employed in Munich by Adolf Hitler's favourite photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. Braun told her older sister that she had met "a man of uncertain age with a funny moustache" who had been admiring her legs in the photo studio. He had subsequently brought her gifts, and after two years of friendship, Braun and Hitler became lovers.

The relationship was kept secret for the sake of Hitler's political career, so Braun did not

follow him to Berlin when Hitler became Chancellor in 1933. Braun dreamed of marriage, but Hitler, who was a desirable gentleman to thousands of German women, announced that he was wedded to Germany and did not want marriage.

In 1936, the French sensationalist newspaper *France Soir* published the story 'Hitler's women', revealing several of the Führer's apparently numerous female acquaintances:

"Right now, the favourite is undoubtedly Eva Braun, the daughter of a Munich teacher. Hitler

has discarded all other women for her," the gossip column said. Nevertheless, Braun had to settle for the status of secret mistress and was installed in Hitler's Berghof retreat in the Bavarian mountains, where she had to hide away in her room whenever Hitler received official visits from heads of state.

"When he says he loves me, it only means he loves me at that particular instant," she confided to her diary in a moment of clarity.

It was only in their final days together in the Führerbunker that Hitler showed a more genuine love for Braun, and her great dream to get married came true in the early hours of 29th April. Less than 40 hours later, she followed her beloved to her death.

Love for Hitler
led Eva Braun to make her fateful decision.

Blondi was also sacrificed

Hitler had always loved German shepherds for their unconditional loyalty, but most beloved of all was Blondi. However, the German shepherd had to die when, after news of Himmler's betrayal broke, Hitler feared that the poison ampoule Himmler had given him would not work. Blondi became a guinea pig when Hitler gave his beloved dog a cyanide capsule that killed her.



near the two bodies... I took off the cap of the petrol can ... Tensely we waited for the shelling in our area to die down before pouring petrol over the corpses. Then I ran out speedily and grabbed the canister. I was trembling as I poured the contents over the two bodies, and repeatedly told myself that I could not do it, but I was conscious of it being Hitler's last order.

"How should we light the petrol? I protested at a suggestion to ignite the bodies using a hand grenade. My glance fell on a large piece of rag... It took only a second to open the petrol tin and

soak the rag with the contents. 'A match!' Dr Goebbels took a box of matches from his pocket and handed it to me. I set light to the rag and once it was afire lobbed it towards the petrol-soaked corpses... A bright flame flared up... Slowly the fire began to nibble at the corpses."

As a sea of flames rose around the Hitlers, the Führer's loyal supporters Goebbels, Bormann, Krebs and Burgdorf stood with outstretched arms. With a final "Heil Hitler" they paid their last respects to their leader. For nearly four hours, the bodies burned until little more than ashes remained. Meanwhile, ►

Hitler's entourage in the bunker began to consider what to do next. Should they follow their Führer to his death or try to save their lives amidst the chaos?

Goebbels family commits suicide

Traudl Junge did not want to die, even though she had been given cyanide. The 25-year-old secretary chose to escape on 1st May in the company of SS adjutant Otto Günsche and a handful of other men:

"Krebs and Burgdorf stand up, smooth down their uniform tunics, and shake hands with everyone in farewell. They are not leaving, they're going to shoot themselves here. Then they go out, parting from those who mean to wait longer. We must wait for darkness to fall. Goebbels walks restlessly up and down, smoking, like a hotel proprietor waiting discreetly and in silence for the last guests to leave the bar. He has stopped complaining and ranting. So the time has come. We all shake hands with him in farewell. He wishes me good luck, with a twisted smile. 'You may get through,' he says softly, in heartfelt tones. But I shake my head doubtfully... One by one, we leave these scenes of horror. I pass Hitler's door for the last time," wrote Junge, who escaped the bunker alive but was captured and held in Soviet captivity until December 1945.

Unlike Junge, Nazi ideology was so deeply rooted in the marrow of Goebbels's thin bones that the propaganda minister did not want himself or his family to live in a Germany without Hitler. So the couple called in SS dentist Helmut Kunz.

"Doctor, I'd be grateful if you would help my wife to put the children to sleep," Goebbels told the dentist Kunz, who tried to talk the couple out of the decision, suggesting instead that they send the children to the Red Cross, where they would be safe from the Soviets. That would be impossible – they were his children, was all the propaganda minister could say.

Rochus Misch, still manning the telephone in the bunker's communications room, remembered how Magda Goebbels dressed the children in the adjoining room where the boy and five girls had slept the previous week:

"Magda Goebbels then began changing one after the other into the same type of long white nightdress ... She combed their hair and caressed the children gently. The nine-year-old Helga was crying ... I knew that this was the final parting of a mother from her children, but I did not want to see it. Frau Goebbels was preparing her children for death."

A short while later, the children were in their bunk beds and Dr Kunz entered their room. *"Not to worry. The doctor here is going to give you each a little jab that all the other children and soldiers are getting,"* the mother reassured before leaving the room.

The doctor went from bed to bed and quickly injected each child with morphine. The dentist ►





Hitler's double, Gustav Weler, remained in the Führerbunker and was murdered by the SS as the Red Army approached. No one knew why the double was murdered, but his body was placed outside the Führerbunker and later fuelled conspiracy theories that Hitler had tried to trick the Soviets before escaping in the heat of battle.



Sightseeing in the ruins.
After Hitler's death, Allied leaders – in this instance Churchill – made a pilgrimage to the site where Hitler met his end.

claimed after the war that he refused to poison the sleeping children and left the room. Instead, it was Hitler's remaining personal physician, Ludwig Stumpfegger, who, together with Magda Goebbels, entered the bedroom, opened the children's mouths, placed a poison capsule between their teeth and clenched their jaws. The eldest daughter, Helga, was found with marks on her face, indicating that she may have put up a struggle.

After the deed was done, Mrs Goebbels joined her husband in his study: *"It's done. The children are dead. Now for ourselves,"* she told her husband.

"We've got to hurry now, there's very little time," Goebbels said, though he did take the time to say goodbye to Misch in the communications room.

"Goebbels gave me a sudden look as if he were seeing me for the first time. Perhaps the fact that he had to address his last words to a simple SS man of the erstwhile bodyguard humiliated him. 'The war is lost – les jeux sont faits. We knew how to live, and now we have to know how to die. I do not need you any longer, Misch. Clear up here.'

"Then he gave me his hand, something he had never done before. His handshake was firm; his

fingers cold. Without another word he withdrew into his room ... It was the end of my captivity in the Führerbunker," wrote Misch, who survived the war but had to spend eight years as a Soviet prisoner.

Joseph and Magda Goebbels walked up the steps to the chancellery garden with adjutant Günther Schwägermann. Gunshots and shells filled the evening sky as the couple took a seat next to the scorched spot where Hitler and his wife had been burned. They put their cyanide capsules in their mouths and chewed hard. Either they shot themselves at the same moment with two Walther pistols they had brought with them, or Schwägermann gave them the coup de grâce and death was certain. By agreement, the adjutant then poured gasoline over their bodies and set them on fire before fleeing. Just hours later, Red Army soldiers made their way to the chancellery garden and the Führerbunker. The bodies of the Goebbels couple were only partially burned. A Soviet major said he could still recognize Joseph Goebbels's distinctive face.

The capture of the Führerbunker went off without a fight. It had been cleared and emptied of life. Only the smell of defeat and death remained in the depths. Berlin's last stronghold had finally fallen. ■



Hitler had no regrets

A day and a half before his death, Hitler had both his private and political wills written. The Führer insisted that his policies had been the right ones and that they must continue after his death.

To the end, Hitler maintained his belief that during his 12 years as Germany's leader he had created a better society. His "love and loyalty to my people" was the foundation of all his actions, and the Führer argued that he had never wanted war.

International "Jewish interests" had forced him into it, he claimed, making no

mention of the millions of dead who had paid the price for his policies. On the contrary, he imagined that "in spite of all setbacks" of the war, it would "go down one day in history as the most glorious and valiant demonstration of a nation's life purpose". In his private will and testament, Hitler explained that "in order to escape the

disgrace of deposition or capitulation", he chose death with his spouse:

"It is our wish to be burnt immediately on the spot where I have carried out the greatest part of my daily work in the course of a 12 years' service to my people ... What I possess belongs - in so far as it has any value - to the Party [or] the State."

HITLER'S HATRED OF JEWS persisted to the end, and the final words of his political testament were that both the people and the new government must ensure that the Jews continued to be treated harshly. The Führer demanded that the "leaders of the nation" should maintain "scrupulous observance of the laws of race and to merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry", and that "all Germans, all National Socialists, men, women and all the men of the Armed Forces, that they be faithful and obedient unto death to the new government".

jeden einzelnen verpflichtet, immer dem gemeinsamen Interesse zu dienen und seine eigenen Vorteile demgegenüber zurückzustellen. Von allen Deutschen, allen Nationalsozialisten, Männern und Frauen und allen Soldaten der Wehrmacht verlange ich, daß sie der neuen Regierung und ihren Präsidenten treu und gehorsam sein werden bis in den Tod.

Vor allem verpflichte ich die Führung der Nation und die Gefolgschaft zur peinlichen Einhaltung der Rassegesetze und zum unbarmherzigen Widerstand gegen den Weltvergifter aller Völker, das internationale Judentum.

SIGNATURE: For the last time in his life, the Führer put his signature to a document. The signature is written in a more uncertain hand than earlier in his career, even though Hitler signed with his right hand, which was his good one.

Gegeben in Berlin, den 29. April 1945, 4.00 Uhr.

NIGHT WORK: Hitler dictated his will and political testament in the early hours of 29th April to secretary Traudl Junge. At 04.00, Junge finished typing the three copies of the document that the Führer wanted her to create.

WITNESSES: Four witnesses signed the will - Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, Private Secretary Martin Bormann and Generals Wilhelm Burgdorf and Hans Krebs.

Als Junge:
Dr. Julius Furrer. Wilhelm Burgdorf
Martin Bormann. Hans Krebs

How friends fell away

HITLER'S comrades

As the war went on, increasing numbers of Hitler's old friends and party comrades deserted the Führer, until only a few loyal men and women were left to surround him in the final days of the war.

1939: Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop gains Hitler's trust when, in August – just a week before the outbreak of war – he signs the **Ribbentrop-Molotov Agreement** with his Soviet counterpart Vyacheslav Molotov. For a time, the masterstroke brings Ribbentrop close to the dictator's inner circle, but the minister's influence wanes as the war progresses.



1939: On 30th August 1939, two days before the outbreak of war, Hitler appoints his Reichsminister of Economics, Walther Funk, to a six-man committee that forms the war cabinet. Funk, who is also **president of the Reichsbank**, is a crucial player throughout the war whenever economically important decisions are made. Funk is personally close to Hitler, giving an annual birthday speech to the dictator.



1944: Joseph Goebbels is one of Hitler's **staunchest supporters**. Goebbels's special position is underlined when, in 1944, Hitler makes him Reich Plenipotentiary for the Total War Effort. Goebbels remains loyal to the end. He and his wife, Magda, commit suicide in the Führerbunker. Magda had previously killed the couple's six children.



1943: Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, **commander-in-chief of the German Kriegsmarine**, is entrusted by Hitler with the important task of rebuilding the navy and preparing it for war. After a stinging defeat to a British flotilla in the Barents Sea in December 1942, Hitler demotes Raeder. The post of commander-in-chief goes instead to Karl Dönitz.



1945: Architect **Albert Speer** is responsible for both the monumental buildings of the Third Reich and the Nazi armaments programme. When Speer refuses to carry out Hitler's orders to destroy key industrial facilities in March 1945, he falls from grace. On 29th April, the day before Hitler's suicide, the Nazi leader removes Speer from his political will.

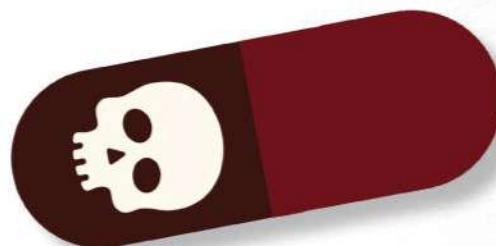


1945: Hermann Fegelein, husband of Eva Braun's sister Gretl and SS liaison officer to the Führer's headquarters, belongs to Hitler's inner circle. But the SS officer's loyalty does not extend to dying with Hitler in the Führerbunker, so he runs away with the intention of **escaping to Sweden or Switzerland**. However, the treacherous Fegelein only makes it as far as his apartment in Berlin. From there, Hitler has him picked up and shot for desertion.



1945: Karl Dönitz, who took over as head of the Kriegsmarine in 1943, serves Hitler loyally throughout the war. This loyalty is rewarded when, on 29th April, Hitler appoints the grand admiral as his successor with the title of president of Germany. Dönitz remains in office until 23rd May 1945, when **he is arrested** by a regiment of the British Royal Air Force.





1941: Rudolf Hess stands side by side with Hitler during the Nazi leader's failed Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. When both men **serve prison sentences** for the crime, Hess takes on the role of private secretary. When the Führer rises to power ten years later, Hess is given a prominent position. He is second in line to succeed Hitler when, in 1941, he flies alone in a small plane to Scotland, ostensibly to negotiate peace with Britain without Hitler's knowledge.

1941: Following Rudolf Hess's escape, Martin Bormann takes over as head of the Nazi Party Chancellery in May. As Bormann was also Hitler's private secretary, he holds one of the most influential positions in the Third Reich during the war. His power includes controlling access to Hitler and thus influences who is admitted to the dictator's inner circle. Bormann remains loyal to the end and only leaves the Führerbunker after **Hitler's death**.

1942: On Heydrich's death, Hitler appoints Heinrich Himmler as head of the Reich Security Main Office. The following year, on 23rd August 1943, Himmler becomes Reichsminister of the Interior. **As head of the SS**, chief of police and interior minister, Himmler is responsible for the overall management of Germany's rapidly expanding network of concentration and extermination camps.



1942: Reinhard Heydrich is one of Hitler's most trusted men, **holding key positions in the SS, security police and intelligence services**. In addition, as chief architect of the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, he plays a crucial role in planning the Nazis' systematic extermination of the Jews. Heydrich remains part of Hitler's circle until he is assassinated on 4th June 1942.



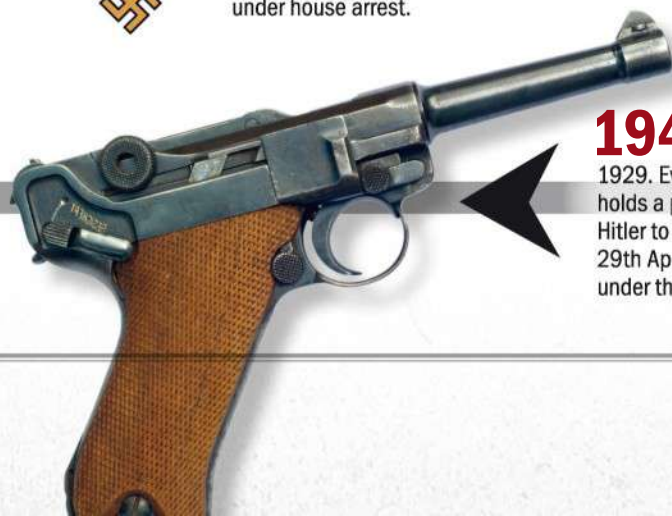
1945: Soviet forces have reached the streets of Berlin when Hitler receives a telegram from the **head of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring**, the man Hitler has named as his successor. In the telegram, Göring writes that if he does not hear from Hitler, he will conclude that the dictator is dead and assume power. Hitler considers the telegram an attempted coup, so strips Göring of all his posts and places him under house arrest.



1945: On the evening of 28th April 1945, the **BBC announces over the radio** that Reichsminister of the Interior Heinrich Himmler has opened peace talks with the Allies. Hitler is furious. The dictator considers "**treue Heinrich**" ("faithful Heinrich") – as he dubs Himmler – one of his most loyal supporters. In revenge for Himmler's overtures to the Allies, Hitler strips him of all state and party powers.



1945: Eva Braun is just 17 when she meets Hitler, 23 years her senior, through photographer Heinrich Hoffmann in 1929. Eva remains hidden from the public eye but, as Hitler's mistress, holds a prominent position in the Nazi leader's inner circle. Eva stands by Hitler to the end. After a hastily arranged wedding in the early hours of 29th April 1945, she **commits suicide with her husband** in the bunker under the Reich Chancellery in Berlin on 30th April.



How friends fell away

HITLER'S allies

The war drove several countries into the arms of Nazi Germany. However, the loyalty of these close allies lasted only until the tide of war turned, with one exception: Japan.

1940: Germany, Italy and Japan sign the so-called **Tripartite Pact, forming a defensive military alliance against the Western Allies**. The grouping is colloquially known as the Axis Powers, a term coined by Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini who had previously referred to a Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936.



1940: **The Axis attack on Greece** places Hungary under pressure. At the same time, Hungary's rulers hope that the Germans will return the northern part of Transylvania to the country, after it had previously been subjugated by the Soviet Union and Romania. As a result, on 20th November, Hungary joins Germany and the other Axis powers.



1943: Italy is the first Axis power to **surrender** to the Allies on 8th September 1943. The surrender comes six weeks after senior members of the Italian Fascist Party remove dictator Benito Mussolini from power. Germany loses an important ally.



1941: On 26th June 1941 – four days after the **German invasion of the Soviet Union** – Finland joins the Axis powers. By entering the war against the USSR on the German side, Finland hopes to regain the territories it lost to the Soviets during the Winter War of 1939-40.



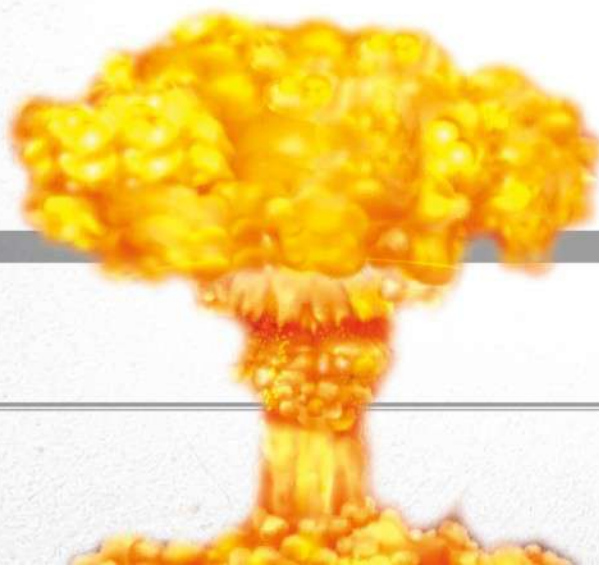
1944: When the USSR invades Romania at the end of August, sentiment turns against the Axis powers. The king, Michael I, deposes the pro-German government in a coup and breaks off the alliance with Germany. On 8th September, **Soviet forces invade Bulgaria**, which also surrenders and leaves the Axis.



1944: In the summer and early autumn, **the Red Army's advance** on the Karelian Isthmus along with pressure from the Western Allies persuade the Finnish government to break with Germany. On 19th September, Finnish war fatigue and the Germans' hopeless situation on the battlefield lead Finnish President Carl Gustaf Mannerheim to sign an armistice with the Soviet Union.



1945: Seven days after Hitler's suicide, on 7th May 1945, Germany surrenders unconditionally. Japan, a staunch alliance partner, fights on. It only formally surrenders on 2nd September, almost a month after the US's **atomic bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**.





1940: Romania enters an alliance with Germany on 23rd November. The country's leaders hope that their support, not least their **abundant contribution of oil from the country's rich reserves**, will prove beneficial to the war effort. In particular, the Romanians hope that they will be protected from the USSR and that Germany will help the country to recover territory annexed by the Soviets.



1940: The Slovak Republic was created in 1938 from the **Munich Agreement between Hitler and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain**. The state is formally independent but is in reality is Germany's puppet. It therefore has no choice when it joins the Tripartite Agreement on 24th November.

1941: Hitler pressures **Yugoslavia** to follow its neighbours and join the Axis powers. The regent, Prince Paul, is persuaded and on 25th March, the country joins the Tripartite Agreement. The alliance is short-lived. Two days after signing, Serbian officers overthrow the government and on 6th April, the Axis invades Yugoslavia, creating the Independent State of Croatia. The country, effectively ruled by Germany, formally joins the Axis on 15th June.



1941: **Bulgaria** manages to remain neutral until spring 1941. However, when Germany offers it part of Thrace and exempts its soldiers from participating in the upcoming invasion of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria's leaders agree to join the Axis powers.



1945: Through the war, **Hungary's alliance with Germany** is threatened from within, as strong political forces want the country to withdraw. Germany occupies Hungary in 1944 to ensure that the Hungarian government remains loyal to the Axis. After a month-and-a-half-long Soviet siege of the capital Budapest, Hungary surrenders on 13th February 1945, but German troops continue to fight on Hungarian soil.



1945: After putting down an uprising in August 1944, German troops keep the client state of Slovakia in an iron grip. Only when **the Soviet Union captures the country's capital Bratislava** on 4th April 1945, does Germany lose its Slovak allies.



1945: In August 1944, **Croatia's fascist head of government, Ante Pavelic**, cracks down on an attempted coup led by senior ministers to dissolve Croatia's alliance with Germany. Pavelic has the coup plotters executed, ensuring Croatia's continued alignment with the Axis powers. Only when troops led by Croatian-born partisan leader Josip Tito and the Red Army expel Hitler's supporters does Croatia surrender to the Allies.





BATTLE FOR CONTROL IN THE RUINS

22
A traitor must never
succeed me as Führer.

Adolf Hitler.

The end of the war 1945



Germany lay in ruins. Yet, in the last days of the war, a group of senior Nazis attempted to win the Allies' backing to preserve the Third Reich.

Battle for control in the ruins

In the weeks that led up to Hitler's death, a power struggle between the Führer's successors had begun. Göring, Himmler and Bormann were in the mix of those who sought to play a leading role in the new Reich. Even after surrendering, the struggle for control continued. But the Allies had other plans for Germany's future.

By Troels Ussing

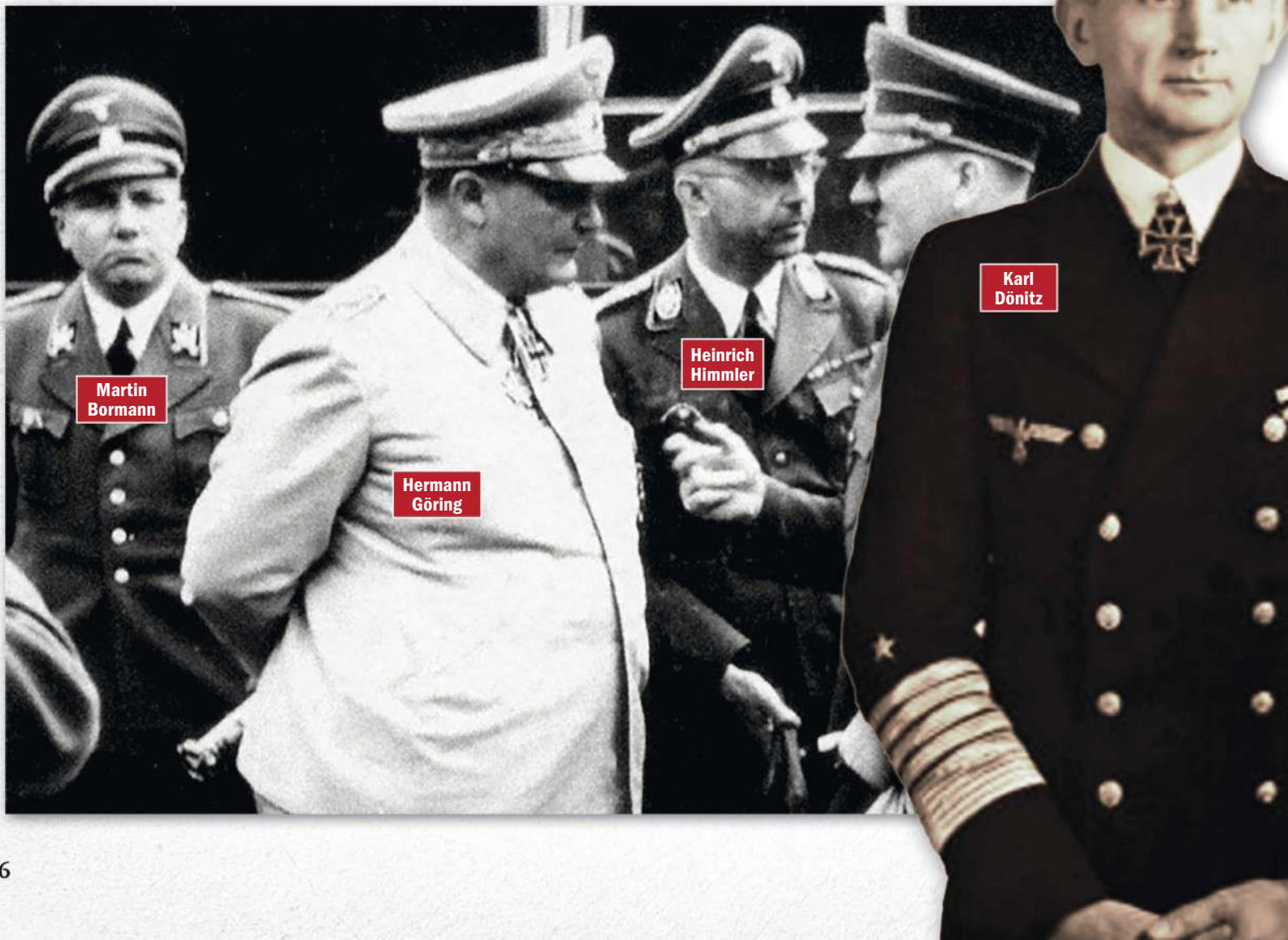
If Göring, Himmler and Bormann had their way, one of them would be Hitler's successor. They were left disappointed when he chose Dönitz.

On the afternoon of 30th April, Martin Bormann stood mournfully in the Führerbunker, gazing at the corpse of Adolf Hitler. The Führer sat open-eyed on the sofa – the leader Bormann had followed and idolised for more than 20 years. Ever since the failed Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, the bull-headed Bormann had worked his way up the Nazi hierarchy, gaining an ever-increasing standing with the Führer. In his private will, Hitler even called the private secretary his “most faithful party comrade” and entrusted Bormann with an important task:

“As executor, I appoint ... Martin Bormann. He is given full legal authority to make all decisions,” Hitler had dictated to his secretary. It was therefore

also Bormann's task to contact Karl Dönitz – commander-in-chief of the German navy, who was up north in Plön, Schleswig-Holstein – to inform him that Hitler had appointed the grand admiral as his successor as head of the Third Reich. Somewhat surprisingly, according to Hitler's political will, the 53-year-old Dönitz was to be the new Reich president, as well as holding the posts of minister of war and supreme commander of the navy.

“The Führer has appointed you, Herr Grossadmiral (Grand Admiral), as his successor. Written full powers follow. With immediate effect you should take all measures which seem appropriate,” was the order in a



telegram to Dönitz, which Bormann sent from the Führerbunker at 18.35 on 30th April.

By that time Hitler had been dead for more than three hours, but Bormann remarkably made no mention of the Führer's suicide. The reason was probably that Hitler's private secretary could not be sure he'd receive any suitably powerful post when Hitler was no longer alive to support him. Although in his political will the Führer had appointed Bormann as party minister of the Nazi Party in the future government, Bormann probably dreamed of more. His unconditional loyalty over two decades apparently led him to expect that he was entitled to even more power after the Führer's fall.

Bormann was not the only one to spy opportunities. Neither Reich Marshal Hermann Göring nor Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler had given up hope of a leading role in the Reich, even though the nation's future looked bleak and the Allies held all the cards. An internal power struggle was brewing.

Senior Nazis lined up for power

The race to become Hitler's successor was launched long before the Führer took his own life. Throughout the war, powerful Nazis such as Himmler, Göring and Bormann had done their utmost to become the Führer's favourite, and when Hitler lost his grip during the spring of 1945, they circled like vultures around the role of Nazi Germany's next leader.

According to a 1941 decree, Göring was Hitler's formal successor if anything happened to the Führer. But Himmler had gained more of Hitler's trust during the war, and after the attempted coup in July 1944,

Himmler seemed a more obvious successor. He headed up both the SS and Gestapo, the only organisations that could control the army, which Hitler no longer trusted. However, both candidates shot themselves in the foot in the week leading up to the Führer's death in their eagerness to become the next Führer of Nazi Germany.

On 23rd April, Göring was sitting in the Bavarian Alps, terrified that the role of Führer might slip through his fingers when he learned that Hitler was going to commit suicide in Berlin. The overweight Nazi feared that Himmler and Bormann would try to hijack the role of successor. So, Göring promptly sent a telegram to the Führerbunker:

"My Führer! In view of your decision to remain at your post in the fortress of Berlin, do you agree that I take over, at once, the total leadership of the Reich, with full freedom of action at home and

abroad, as your deputy, in accordance with your decree of 29th June 1941? If no reply is received by ten o'clock tonight, I shall take it for granted that you have lost your freedom of action, and shall consider the conditions of your decree as fulfilled, and shall act for the best interests of our country and our people."

The telegram was signed "Your loyal Hermann Göring", but Hitler saw it as anything but loyal – not least because, as Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge noted, Bormann was doing his utmost to influence the Führer in the bunker:

"This telegram fell into Bormann's hands. He showed it to Hitler, putting his own interpretation on it. No wonder that Hitler saw treachery in Göring's proposition, fell into a furious rage against the Reich Marshal and removed him from all his offices. Bormann may have smiled with self-satisfaction to think that now, at five minutes to midnight, he had succeeded yet again in strengthening his own power," noted Junge.

On the same day, Himmler had also made a major blunder in his eagerness to secure power in the Germany that would follow Hitler. The Reichsführer-SS, like Göring and Bormann, lived in a fantasy world where it was believed that the Allies would agree to preserve the Third Reich, and so he had begun meeting with the Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte to negotiate a peace settlement. Himmler thought that by taking the lead role as peacemaker he would secure the role of leader after the war, and on the evening of 23rd April, the Reichsführer-SS formally requested Bernadotte to contact the Western Allies on his behalf to arrange a ceasefire on the Western Front. But the plan had not gone as expected.

"A traitor must never succeed me as Führer," Hitler shouted angrily as rumours of Himmler's overtures to the Americans and British trickled into the Führerbunker on 28th April.

Shortly afterwards, the Führer made it clear what he thought of Göring and Himmler. The two Nazis had failed miserably, and Hitler cemented their fate in his political testament:

"Before my death, I expel from the Party the former Reich Marshal, Hermann Göring, and withdraw from him all the rights conveyed upon him by the Decree of 29th June 1941 and by my Reichstag speech of 1st September 1939. In his place I appoint Grand Admiral Dönitz as Reich President and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.

"Before my death I expel from the Party and from all his offices the former Reichsführer-SS and Reich Minister of the Interior, Heinrich Himmler ... Goering and Himmler, by their secret negotiations with the enemy, without my knowledge or approval, and by their illegal attempts to seize power in the state, quite apart ▶

FACTS

The choice of Karl Dönitz as Hitler's successor was no accident. The admiral had been a **vocal supporter of Hitler's regime** throughout the war. In addition, Dönitz's navy was not involved in the 20th July attack on Hitler, and the grand admiral therefore appeared blameless in Hitler's eyes.

The Third Reich was squeezed from all corners of the world



When Dönitz took power after Hitler, all that remained of the once vast Third Reich was a sad remnant. Germany was squeezed on all fronts, and in the spring of 1945, the Nazis had to look far and wide for Wehrmacht flags on the military map of European possessions. Since 1943, the fortunes of war had gone in one direction only: backwards – and fast.

The remaining part of the pre-war Germany was reduced to a speck in central Europe, squeezed by Eisenhower's Western Allied troops storming through Lower Saxony in the north, and from northern Italy and Austria in

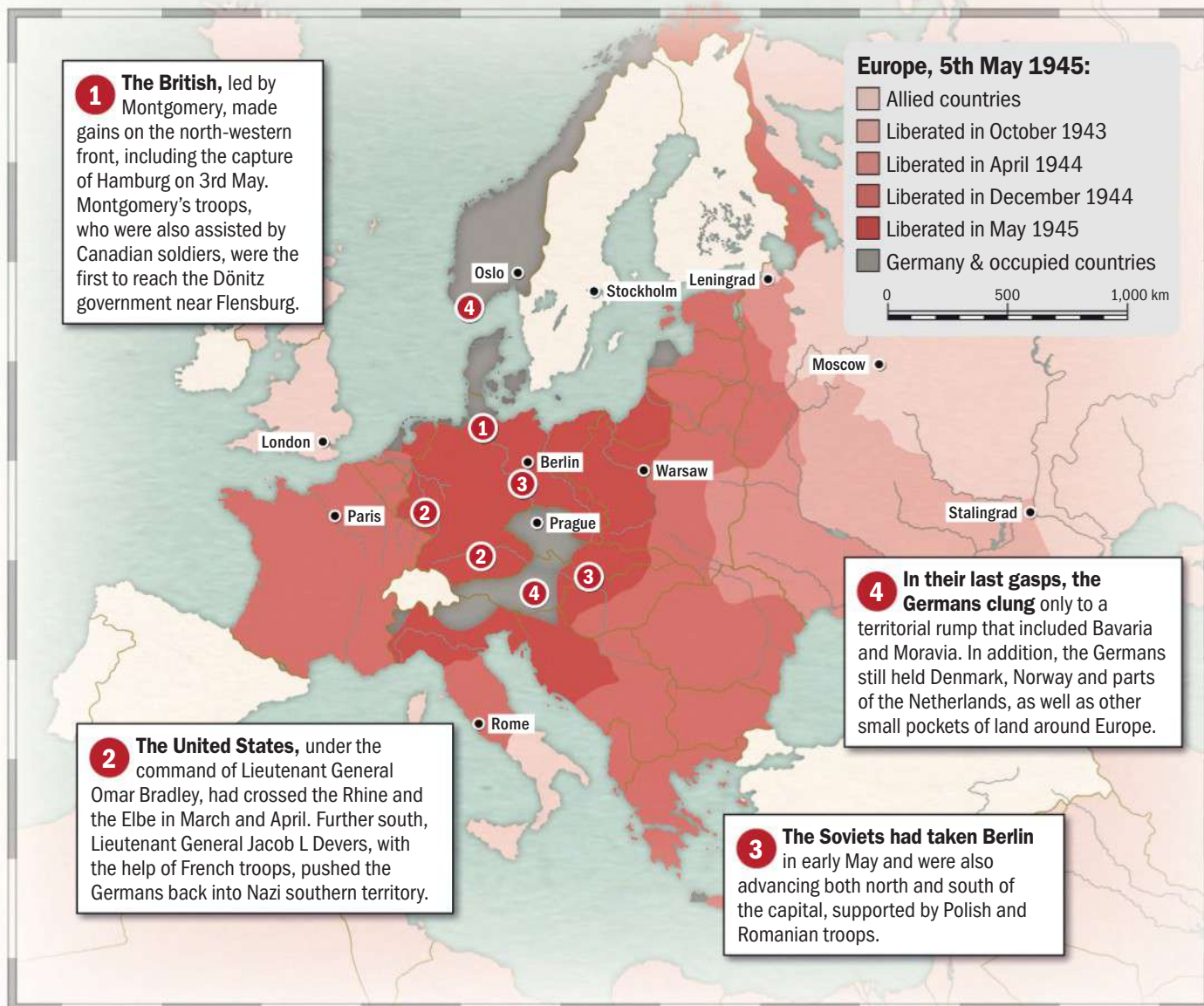
the south. The Germans could not resist, and in April 1945 alone the Allies on the Western Front took 1.5 million prisoners of war.

On the Eastern Front, the situation was equally depressing from a German perspective. Between January and April, more than 800,000 German soldiers had surrendered to the Red Army, which in May 1945 crushed the remnants of the Third Reich from the Balkans in the south to Mecklenburg in the north.

It therefore didn't take much expertise to realise that the war was lost, which is why the Dönitz government was quick to surrender.



Allied generals rejoiced at the German surrender in May 1945.



My Führer! My loyalty to you will be unconditional. I shall do everything possible to relieve you in Berlin. ■ Karl Dönitz, grand admiral.

from their treachery to my person, have brought irreparable shame on the country and the whole people," the Führer dictated in his will.

Dönitz amazed by appointment

The loyal Dönitz had thus overtaken all the plotters. However, the fleet commander in Plön was surprised when Bormann delivered the news on the evening of 30th April. In principle, Dönitz had never wanted such a powerful post, but he nevertheless accepted his new responsibilities. Since Martin Bormann had not informed him that the Führer was already dead, the admiral sent his reply directly to Hitler:

"My Führer! My loyalty to you will be unconditional. I shall do everything possible to relieve you in Berlin. If Fate nevertheless compels me to rule the Reich as your appointed successor, I shall continue this war to an end worthy of the unique, heroic struggle of the German people."

While Bormann kept Hitler's death a secret from Dönitz, the ambitious Nazi worked hard to eliminate his opponents. Himmler was in Schleswig-Holstein with Dönitz, and on 'behalf' of the Führer, Bormann expected the grand admiral to "take instant and

ruthless actions against traitors" like Himmler who had presumed to negotiate with the enemy.

However, at a meeting in Plön, Himmler denied to Dönitz that he had taken part in such negotiations, and the admiral did not feel equipped to either accuse or arrest the Reichsführer, who was always flanked by several of his SS bodyguards. Prior to the meeting, Himmler had arrived with as many as six bodyguards in a motorcade of open Volkswagens, and SS soldiers were also seen skulking among the trees in the park near Dönitz's headquarters.

The admiral was therefore a little worried when, at the meeting, he had fished out the telegram confirming he had been appointed Hitler's successor – a post that, despite the controversy of recent days, Himmler still felt confident that the Führer would hand over to him. How Hitler's former favourite would react remained to be seen, and the bespectacled Nazi was, after all, still in control of the SS and the German police. So, as a precaution, Karl Dönitz had hidden a pistol under a stack of documents on his desk before handing Himmler the fateful telegram.

"As he read, an expression of astonishment, indeed, of consternation spread over his face. All▶

A free Europe drew near as the Germans surrendered in the Netherlands, Denmark and north-west Germany on 5th May.



The war must end in Berlin, the Soviets demanded. Top German officers such as Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel were therefore compelled to head to the capital to sign the peace treaty.





hope seemed to collapse within him. He went very pale. Finally he stood up and bowed. 'Allow me,' he said, 'to become the second man in your state.' I replied that that was out of the question and that there was no way in which I could make any use of his services," Dönitz recounted.

A dejected Himmler disappeared with his bodyguards without making a scene. However, he had not yet shelved his dreams of power.

Bormann's dreams ended in Berlin

Martin Bormann had still been in the Führerbunker in Berlin as Soviet shells rained down on the Reich Chancellery on the morning of 1st May. He had moved into the communications room and sent another message off to Plön:

"Grand Admiral Dönitz, the Testament is in force. I will join you as soon as possible. Till then, I recommend that publication be held up," it said cryptically. Bormann clearly wanted to get out of Berlin and go to Plön to discuss the future of the Reich with Dönitz in person.

Historians can only guess at Bormann's motives, but it's likely Hitler's private secretary had hoped to convince the nation's new Reich president that he should be given a senior position in the new regime.

While Bormann was dressing in civilian clothes and preparing to escape from the bunker, Minister of Propaganda Goebbels had decided to take his own life. But before doing so, he sent a telegram to Dönitz informing him that *"the Führer had died yesterday at 1530 hours"*, detailing some of the ministerial appointments that Hitler had detailed in his will.

Dönitz had found the secrecy surrounding the dictator's death highly suspicious and assumed that his rivals were trying to buy time to prepare a coup. He had therefore instructed his guards to arrest Goebbels and Bormann if they appeared at the Plön headquarters. Dönitz had no idea that Goebbels had only hours to live.

That evening, Bormann sneaked out of the Führerbunker accompanied by Hitler's personal physician, Ludwig Stumpfegger, and Artur Axmann, the head of the Hitler Youth, among others. In his pocket, Bormann carried a copy of Hitler's personal will, which he allegedly intended to present to Dönitz as documentary proof to back up his claim.

Shells continued to smash into Berlin's heaps of rubble, and as Bormann and his party attempted to cross the Spree River via the Weidendammer Bridge, one exploded close to Stumpfegger and Bormann. Both were thrown to the ground but got back to their feet. They had tried to escape by following some railroad tracks in an easterly direction, but here they were mowed down from behind by Soviet gunners. Axmann saw their bodies lying in the moonlight before rushing on. Bormann thus never reached ►

FACTS

Karl Dönitz's government was extremely short-lived. Lasting only

23

days, Dönitz served as president of the Reich before being ousted by the Allies.

My first task is to save German men and women from destruction by the advancing Bolshevik enemy. ■ Karl Dönitz, grand admiral.

Dönitz, who was busy plotting his next move as Reich president. After conversations with Field Marshal Keitel and General Jodl, both of whom had escaped Berlin in time, Dönitz was in no doubt that he had to sue for peace. The Reich president would seek an armistice on the Western Front, but continue the war on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union.

This would allow him to keep the escape routes open so that soldiers and civilians in large numbers could reach the safety of the British and Americans, who did not carry out the same level of atrocities as the Soviets had done on their way to Berlin.

"My first task is to save German men and women from destruction by the advancing Bolshevik enemy. It is to serve this purpose alone that the military struggle continues," Dönitz declared in his first radio address to the nation on 1st May.

Himmler and Göring battled on

Over the following 24 hours, Dönitz had begun to put together his new government. Germany's new leader chose not to follow Hitler's list of appointments, as he did not want a large number of well-known Nazi fanatics on his staff. Dönitz's right-hand man was the

conservative Johann Ludwig Schwerin von Krosigk, who was appointed both minister for foreign affairs and leading minister, and together the two drove on the evening of 2nd May to Mürwik, near Flensburg, where the new government was based.

But Himmler moved with him. The former Reich minister of the interior wouldn't accept his fall from favour and so also established his headquarters in Flensburg. Time and again he appeared after Dönitz's staff conferences to tell them how indispensable he was. Eventually, the Reich president had had enough.

"In view of the present situation, I have decided to dispense with your further assistance [and] now regard all your offices as abolished. I thank you for the service which you have given to the Reich," Dönitz wrote in a letter to Himmler to finally dash the plotter's dreams.

Nor had Göring apparently abandoned his fantasies of power. From his base in the Bavarian Alps, he had sent Dönitz a telegram offering to negotiate a *"fair and honourable peace"* with the Western Allies as *"Marshal to Marshal"*. However, Dönitz ignored the proposal. Negotiations for a surrender were already under way with the British. The Reich president had

The Dönitz government was ousted on the morning of 23rd May. They now awaited the trials that would convict many as war criminals.



sent his trusted colleague, and newly appointed supreme commander of the navy, Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg with a small entourage to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's headquarters at Lüneburg with an offer of surrender in an attaché case.

"They were brought to my caravan and were drawn up under the Union Jack, which was flying proudly in the breeze," Montgomery recalled. "I kept them waiting for a few minutes and then came out of my caravan and walked towards them. They all saluted under the flag. It was a great moment. I knew that the Germans had come to surrender."

However, the German proposal to stand down only a few forces between Berlin and Rostock was received somewhat lukewarmly and dismissively by Monty:

"I said to von Friedeburg: 'Will you surrender to me all German forces on my western and northern flanks, including all forces in Holland, Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark?' I added that, if he could not agree to this, and if Germany refused to surrender in these areas unconditionally, I would order the fighting to continue and many more German soldiers would be killed, and civilians too from artillery fire and air attack."

Von Friedeburg had contacted Dönitz first, but on the evening of 4th May, the Germans signed the partial capitulation as rain poured down outside the tent canvas. The Germans' next stop was in Reims. There the US General Eisenhower awaited.

Eisenhower demanded full surrender

Von Friedeburg and his entourage drove through countless vineyards before arriving at the US headquarters in Reims. The city of Champagne had been the setting for several royal coronations in the past, but in May 1945 the king of the city was Dwight D Eisenhower. The commander-in-chief of the Western Allied forces had no intention of giving Dönitz's simple negotiator an audience with the wartime king himself, so instead Eisenhower had one of his subordinates explain to von Friedeburg that the American would only accept an unconditional German surrender on all fronts – the Germans had to throw away their partial surrender proposal for now and come back with something better.

As von Friedeburg had no mandate to negotiate such a demand, he had to contact Dönitz, who sent General Alfred Jodl to France instead. The Germans had nothing to negotiate with but tried to delay the surrender for at least two more days so that more German soldiers and civilians could flee westwards and avoid Soviet captivity. But Eisenhower, an ally of the Red Army, had double-crossed them and flatly rejected their proposal for a 48-hour period of reflection – this time in person:

"Their actual purpose was merely to gain time. I finally had to inform them that I would break off

NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



The Guardian

5th May 1945

Capitulation on Montgomery front

– Holland, Denmark, NW Germany

Field Marshal Montgomery has won his greatest triumph. He reported to General Eisenhower last night that all the German forces in north-west Germany, Holland and Denmark have surrendered to the 21st Army Group.

The surrender will take effect at eight o'clock this morning.

Following is the text of last night's announcement from SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force):

Field Marshal Montgomery has reported to the Supreme Allied Commander that all enemy forces in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark, including Heligoland and the Frisian Islands, have surrendered to the 21st Army Group, to be effective at 08.00 hours British Double Summer Time tomorrow.

This is a battlefield surrender, involving the forces now facing the 21st Army Group on their northern and western flanks.

Over a million men are authoritatively stated to be involved in the surrender, making

it the biggest of the war. It was signed on the German side by an admiral who succeeded Dönitz as commander-in-chief of the German Navy. Field Marshal Montgomery, it is learned, has not met Dönitz himself in the course of the negotiations.

The Germans attempted almost to the last to carry out their plan to "split" the Allies by offering to the British the surrender of their troops facing the Russians. This offer was resolutely refused by Field Marshal Montgomery.

The present surrender means in effect that the war in Europe is virtually over. There are now only two German-held "pockets" of any size – western Czechoslovakia and Norway. The other pockets are Dresden and Breslau inside Germany, four ports on the French coast, the Channel Islands, Latvia and a small group in East Prussia.

Reuter's correspondent at 21st Army Group Headquarters said last night that the inability of the German command on this front to control outlying units such as in Norway is believed to be the reason why the surrender is not wider in scope.

all negotiations and seal the western front, preventing by force any further westward movement of German soldiers and civilians unless they agreed to my terms of surrender," Eisenhower later wrote about the negotiations in his memoirs.

Jodl was backed into a corner and could do nothing but telegraph his assessment to Dönitz:

"I see no alternative – it is either chaos or signature. I ask you to confirm to me▶

Senior Nazis were put in the dock

In the autumn of 1945, World War II's victors gathered Hitler's closest henchmen in Nuremberg. Here Göring, Keitel and all the other defeated Germans were held accountable for their actions during the war.

After spreading terror and horror across Europe, the Nazis responsible were held accountable for their actions during the Nuremberg Trials, which began in November 1945. Twenty-four Germans – three of them in absentia due to suicide, debilitation or disappearance – took the dock. Four charges were brought against them: crimes against humanity in the form of state-organised mass murder of the Jews, crimes against peace resulting from the German conduct of the war, war crimes against prisoners in Nazi custody, and membership of a criminal conspiracy.

Some of the accused seemed more distressed by the situation than others. Göring, a weak and beaten man at the time of his capture, had meanwhile recovered and had apparently decided to appear calm and

composed at the Nuremberg Trials. Göring was also the only one of the accused to appear completely unmoved as images of the concentration camps, with endless rows of pale corpses, were shown on film. While Field Marshal Keitel wiped his eyes with a handkerchief, Göring used his only to dab his sweating forehead. Without blinking, the Reich marshal on the witness stand also acknowledged his past, including his responsibility for the laws against Jews:

"I issued them and consequently am responsible, and do not propose to hide in any way behind the Führer's order."

The judges' verdict on Hermann Göring after the nearly year-long trial was also unmistakable:

"Göring was often, indeed almost always, the moving force, second only to his

leader. He was the leading war aggressor, both as political and as military leader; he was the director of the slave labour programme and the creator of the oppressive programme against the Jews and other races, at home and abroad ... The record discloses no excuses for this man."

Göring was sentenced, like 11 other senior Nazis – including Keitel, Jodl, Ribbentrop and Bormann in absentia, as his body had not yet been found – to death by hanging. Dönitz was sentenced to ten years in prison, while Speer was given life imprisonment, only to be pardoned in 1966.

Himmler was not part of the process, as the Reichsführer committed suicide after being captured by British troops on the day the Dönitz government was dissolved in Flensburg.

With no visible signs of remorse, Göring acknowledged his responsibility for the genocide of Europe's Jews at the Nuremberg Trials.



The surrender of Nazi Germany will become an important historical fact. It should not take place in France [but in] the capital of the Nazi state, Berlin. ■ Joseph Stalin.

immediately by wireless that I have full powers to sign capitulation.” At 02.41 on 7th May, Jodl and Friedeburg signed the unconditional surrender on all fronts – including the Eastern Front. The war was over and later that day Schwerin von Krosigk spoke on the radio:

“After a heroic struggle of almost six years of almost incomparable hardship Germany has succumbed to the overwhelming power of her enemies. To continue the war would only mean senseless bloodshed,” Dönitz’s right-hand man explained to the few listeners with access to a radio.

It’s likely that Göring did not hear the transmission before he left the Bavarian mountains. But when he was apprehended by US soldiers, he waved a letter to Eisenhower in which the corpulent Nazi announced that he was offering the general his help as a peace negotiator. By then, however, Göring had lost any previous position of power and had nothing to negotiate with. Only death awaited.

The finishing line was set in Berlin

While champagne corks popped in Reims, the Soviets felt they were being snubbed.

“The Western Allies have forced this on us. They want the world to picture the Nazi surrender in front of them, with our country relegated to a supporting role,” exclaimed an offended General Alexei Antonov, the chief of staff of the Red Army High Command, the Stavka. And the leader of the Soviet Union had agreed:

“We have suffered most from Hitler’s aggression and made the greatest contribution to our common victory. Russia broke the back of the Fascist beast. And now – at the very end of the war – this happens ... The surrender of Nazi Germany will become an important historical fact. It should not take place in France ... but in the place where all the aggression came from, the capital of the Nazi state, Berlin,” Stalin argued.

The Soviet leader demanded that a new signing take place in the ruins of Berlin. The final surrender – including a few adjustments to the agreement – must be made in the capital, and General Eisenhower thought the demand was only fair.

“I would be happy to come to Berlin tomorrow, at an hour specified by Marshal Zhukov, who I understand will be the Russian representative,” the American replied to his Soviet counterparts.

The German army chiefs were also flown to the capital on 8th May, where they had to wait all day for the Western Allies to arrive. At 21.20, the agreement was signed in an official ceremony. Zhukov never forgot the historic moment:

“After the signing I congratulated everyone present. Then an incredible commotion broke out in the hall. Everyone was congratulating one another



Relieved German soldiers were disarmed at the border as they left Denmark after Germany’s surrender.

and shaking hands. Many had tears of joy in their eyes. I was surrounded by my comrades-in-arms.”

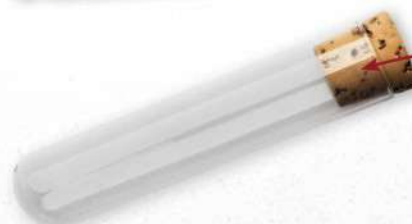
The guns had fallen silent once and for all in Europe, but Germany was still under the leadership of Grand Admiral Dönitz, who now – to secure his own position – made a clean break with Nazism. On the same evening that peace was cemented in Berlin, the Reich president addressed the nation from the radio studio in Flensburg.

“We must look facts in the face. The foundations upon which the German Reich was constructed have been shattered. Unity of State and Party no longer exists,” he declared.

For two weeks, the Dönitz government continued to hold cabinet meetings to discuss the country’s supply situation and future. At times, it still believed that the Allies wanted its help in rebuilding a devastated Germany – not least because ministers were certain that the Western powers would find it difficult to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union.

Dönitz remained German leader until 23rd May 1945, when soldiers from the British occupying ►

Many senior Nazis chose to commit suicide with a poison ampoule.



The vial contained deadly cyanide, which was lethal within seconds.



There was a brief moment of joy and happiness in Allied relations in the summer of 1945, when Soviet generals were even knighted by the British.

AT THE SAME TIME

BRITAIN:

- Churchill leaves office as prime minister.

PACIFIC OCEAN:

- Fierce battles for the island of Okinawa rage.

JAPAN:

- Eighty-five percent of Yokohama is destroyed in a bombing raid.

forces entered the makeshift offices in Mürwik and dissolved the German government. The Allies wanted to determine Germany's future themselves. Instead, the war crimes trial in Nuremberg awaited Dönitz and other prominent figures who'd played roles in the Nazi regime. In principle, the same fate awaited Himmler, who tried to flee the country in disguise under the name Heinrich Hitzinger. With an eye patch, Himmler was not immediately recognised when a British patrol apprehended him, but the senior Nazi ultimately chose to reveal his identity in the naïve hope that his prominent position might bring him benefits. When Himmler realised this wouldn't be the case, he bit into a cyanide capsule he'd hidden in his mouth.

Germany and Berlin would be divided

With the Dönitz government out of the picture, the Allies took the baton of Germany's governance. The country was divided into zones, with the Allied nations controlling each area through military governments made up of officers. Berlin was also divided into occupation zones.

"It's a topsy-turvy world with our country all sliced up," observed one female Berliner who had survived the

Soviets' merciless and vengeful conquest of the capital in the spring. But the end of the war wouldn't transform her and Berliners' harsh lives overnight. Although women were no longer at risk of attacks from soldiers, everyday life was still a struggle. Berlin was in ruins. The city was grey and dusty, and as the summer sun tried to penetrate the dusty fog, the city's women worked to bring their capital back to life. Rubble was carted away or added to huge *Trümmerberge* – mountains of rubble – that towered over the city.

Hunger, however, was Berliners' greatest concern. Supplies were at rock bottom and finding food was as difficult as it had been in the final weeks of the war.

"Everywhere you turn you can sense the fear. People are worried about their bread, their work, their pay, about the coming day ... God knows what we'll all end up eating," wrote the anonymous diarist, who herself ate nettles to survive.

Despite bleak living conditions, she and most other Berliners found hope for the future. *"I only know that I want to survive,"* she wrote to conclude her diary in the summer of 1945.

The 'dead city', as some called Berlin, had endured much – but it would rise again. ■

Germany and Berlin were divided into four zones



The victors met in Potsdam, outside Berlin, in the summer of 1945 to pass judgment on Nazi Germany. The conference was the last major one of its kind between the leading Allied nations, and the climate was largely characterised by mistrust between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. As a result, Hitler's prediction that the "unnatural coalition" of his enemies would collapse into enmity was proved correct.

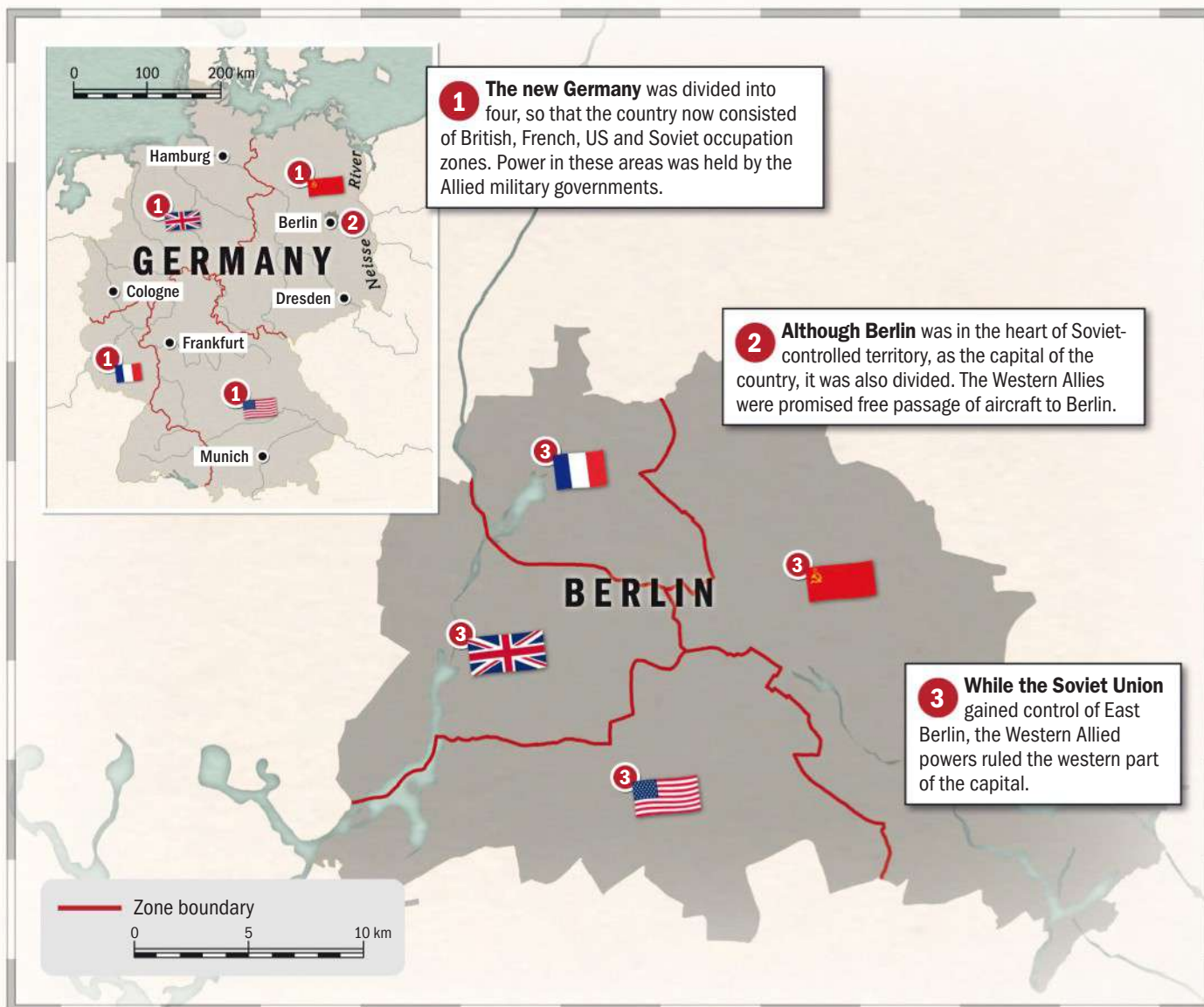
The parties ended up dividing Germany into four occupation zones, with the three major Allied powers – the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom – taking control

of the largest areas, while France was given control of the regions bordering the country. Berlin, located in the middle of the Soviet zone, was also split into four different sectors.

In addition, Truman, Churchill and Stalin decided that Germany would have to give up some of its possessions that predated Hitler's rise to power. At the same time, the Germans were not allowed to rearm in the future. The production of weapons, aircraft and ships was therefore banned. Finally, the Soviet Union was compensated for its suffering during the war by receiving huge amounts of material and equipment from German industry.



In the summer of 1945, the Allies divided Germany between them.



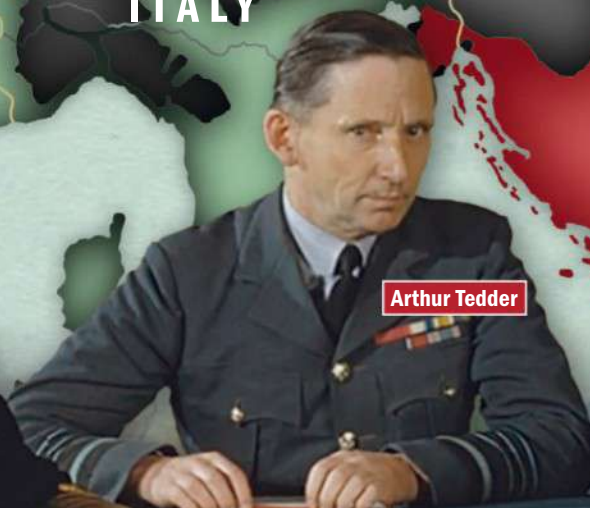
EUROPE – May 1945



Omar Bradley



Bertram Ramsay



Arthur Tedder





FINLAND

Helsinki

Leningrad

Tallinn

ESTONIA

Riga

LATVIA

LITHUANIA

EAST
PRUSSIA

SOVIET UNION

POLAND

UKRAINE

Stalingrad

Odessa

ROMANIA

Bucharest

Dwight D Eisenhower

Bernard Montgomery

Trafford Leigh-Mallory

Walter Bedell Smith

The senior generals on the Western Front
refused to negotiate peace with
representatives of the Nazi regime.

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*Hitler's fall revealed the
horrific concentration camps
where millions of Jews were
killed by the Nazis.*

Imperial War Museum
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"THE RUSSIANS ARE ABOUT TO SUFFER THE BLOODIEST DEFEAT OF THEIR HISTORY AT THE GATES OF BERLIN!"

Adolf Hitler, 21st April 1945.

These were the words of Adolf Hitler just days before the fall of Berlin. The increasingly disillusioned leader of the Third Reich still clung to the faint hope that the Hitler Youth, fanatical SS soldiers and World War I veterans could keep the Soviet war machine at bay. The reality was very different. Berlin's defenders were a ragtag army of scared young boys and older men who had never held a gun in their hands, and the fall of Nazi Germany was just weeks away in April 1945. In this issue, 'The Fall of Berlin', you'll be given the full story of the Third Reich's final collapse as told by the eyewitnesses who saw it happen.



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